THE SANDMAN
LIVING THE DREAM ON-SET

PREDATOR: BADLANDS
A SAVAGE NEW SCI-FI CHAPTER BEGINS!

SFX

SFX 30 YEARS

STAR TREK™ STRANGE NEW WORLDS
GALACTIC EXCLUSIVE!

THE ENTERPRISE CREW BOLDLY GO FURTHER THAN EVER

JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH
We, my friends, have dinosaurs

SQUID GAME
Red light!

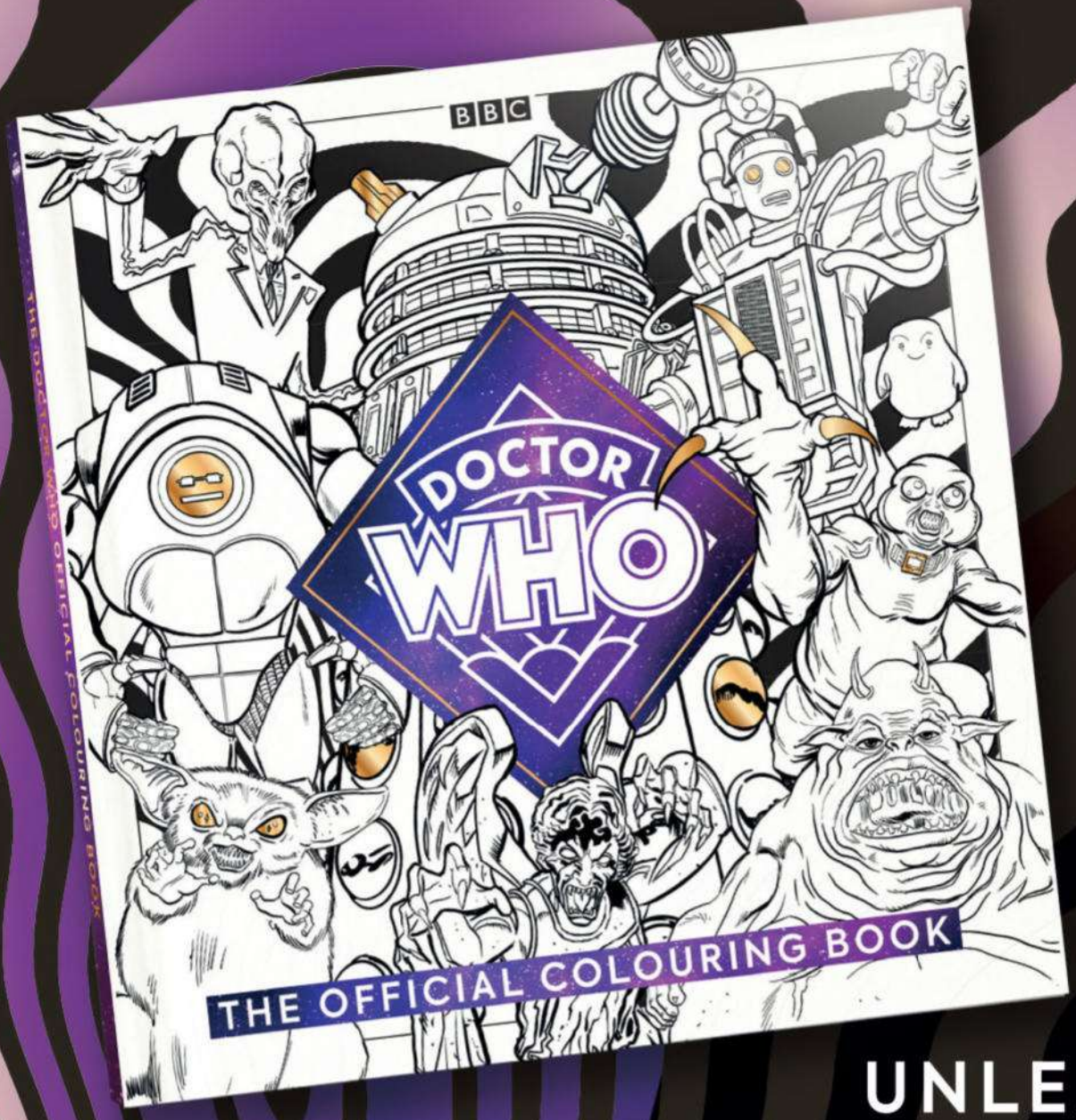
THE SHROUDS
All hail David Cronenberg

THE INSTITUTE
Stephen King's new horror show

THE BRIAN CLEMENS ARCHIVE
The unmade James Bond

PLUS! STRANGER THINGS | IRONHEART | 28 YEARS LATER | THE TOXIC AVENGER SUPERMAN | FRIGHT NIGHT | GEORGE A ROMERO | CAPTAIN AMERICA | KONG!

ISSUE 393 JULY 2025 £5.75
PRINTED IN THE UK
FUTURE

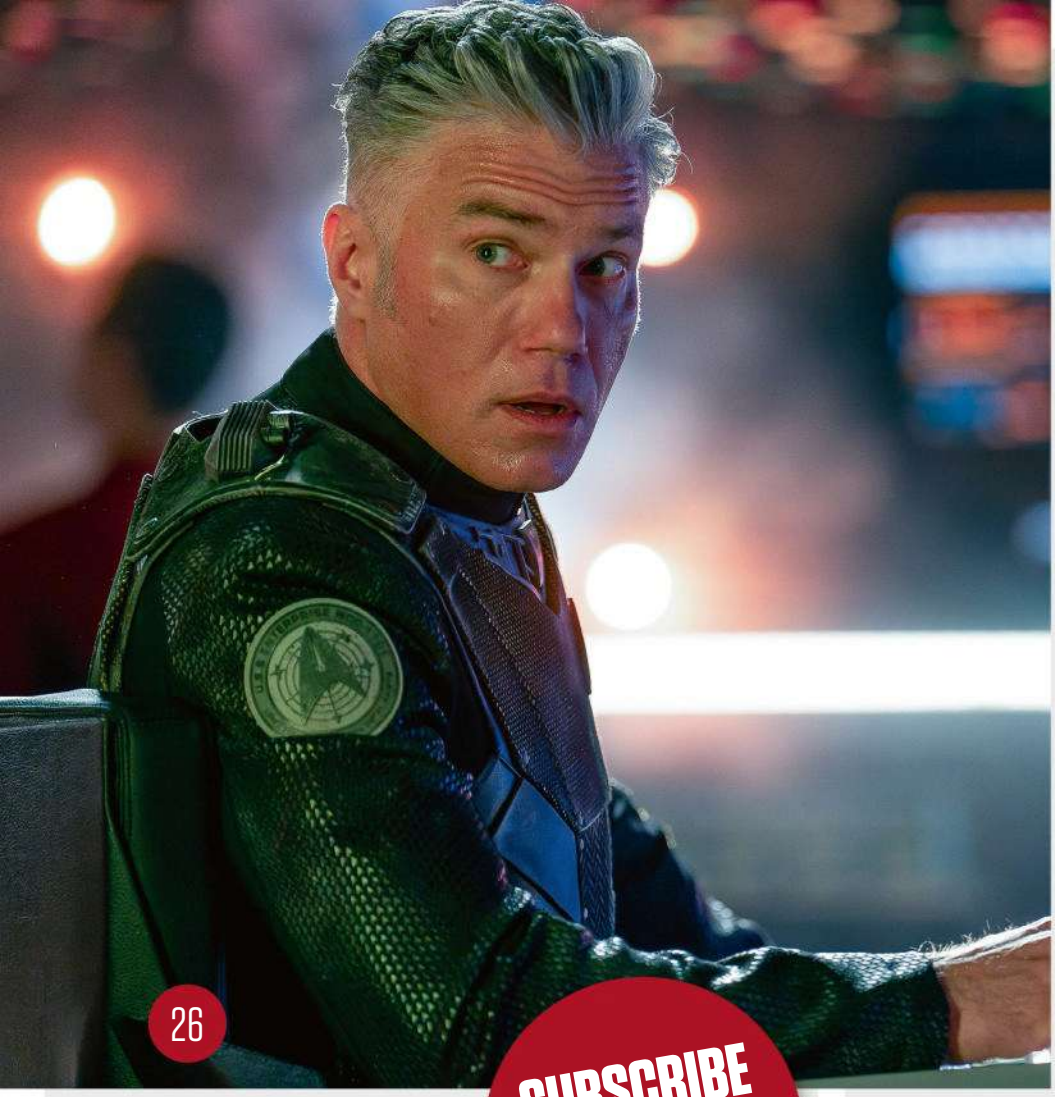


BBC DOCTOR WHO

UNLEASH YOUR CREATIVITY

BBC, DOCTOR WHO, TARDIS, DALEK and CYBERMAN (word marks and devices) are trade marks of the British Broadcasting Corporation and are used under licence. BBC logo © BBC 1996. DOCTOR WHO logo © BBC 1973. Dalek image © BBC/Terry Nation 1963. Cyberman image © BBC/Kit Pedler/Gerry Davis 1966. Licensed by BBC Studios.

ORDER NOW



SUBSCRIBE NOW & SAVE!
Head to page 25 for details

FEATURES

26 STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS
Gorn to be wild in season three.

32 THE SANDMAN
A Dream to some, a nightmare to others.

40 SQUID GAME
Calamari? More like *killer*mari, are we right?

46 JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH
The franchise that laughs in the face of extinction.

50 THE SHROUDS
It could be David Cronenberg's most personal film.

58 THE BRIAN CLEMENS ARCHIVE
More rare gems from the vault of a TV master.

64 FRIGHT NIGHT
Staking out the bloodsucking '80s classic.

RED ALERT

6 PREDATOR: BADLANDS
You never forget your first kill.

10 28 YEARS LATER
So is this post-post-post-apocalypse now?

14 IRONHEART
Marvel's metalhead has no time to rust.

18 SUPERMAN
Man of Steel. Dog of Bonio.

21 CAPTAIN AMERICA
Steve Rogers is set to defrost.

REVIEWS

72 HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON
DreamWorks Animation goes real (ish).

75 DOCTOR WHO
Flood alert! "Season two" (don't write in) in the spotlight.

76 PREDATOR: KILLER OF KILLERS
A-Hunting we will go...

82 BURY OUR BONES IN THE MIDNIGHT SOIL
VE Schwab spans the centuries.

90 BATMAN: HUSH 2
Whisper it – the Dark Knight classic has a sequel.

REGULARS

68 BROUGHT TO BOOK
Holly Race takes on Henry VIII.

87 THE WRITE STUFF
VE Schwab answers our author questionnaire.

94 FLASHBACK
Star Cops and Super flops... it's July 1987!

96 BLASTERMIND
We quiz you on Cronenberg's body of work.

Captain's Log

Summer blockbuster season has begun! Sorry to anyone expecting flashy new features on *Superman* or *28 Years Later*, however, but apparently not one person was available from either production to speak to a movie magazine that's been running for 30 years. Make of that what you will, but since losing Total Film we did think that people might be a little bit more supportive...

Still, we're sure you'll see influencers giving the cast and crew gifts or asking them to play a fun game online soon enough. Fortunately for us, as ever, there's just more genre content than we can realistically include – which is a good problem to have!

So huge thanks, as ever, to the team at *Star Trek* as *Strange New Worlds finally* returns. Don't ever leave us this long again! Plus we go on set for the final season of *The Sandman*, say farewell to *Squid Game* (they'll definitely do a spin-off, right?) and chat to the absolutely legendary David Cronenberg – proving that Ian can still get excited after all these years. He just needs a sit down afterwards.

Meanwhile I've been zipping around all over the place getting things in place for the second half of our 30th anniversary year. Yes, I'm exhausted (it's not just Ian that gets tired) but I'm very, very excited for everything to come together. It's true what they say, no rest for the wicked!

Darren
X

Get in touch!

Email
sfx@futurenet.com

Facebook
facebook.com/SFXmagazine

X/Instagram
Follow @sfxmagazine and tag us!

IMAGES: NETFLIX, BOB PENN/20TH CENTURY FOX/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Absolutely loved *How To Train Your Dragon*. I knew it wasn't *actually* real, but still I couldn't process that it wasn't *actually* real. A huge hit.

→ It's Code Orange in stores now – meaning that Halloween decorations are starting to go on sale. Yes, it's always spooky season.

→ I've been zipping around doing various exciting things for future issues of SFX. Can't say a *word*, but it's great fun!

RANTS

→ You can see my main rant in the editor's letter... I'm (literally) not asking for much, really!

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Strongly tempted to bid for David Lynch's taxidermy deer heads, or his Christmas stocking, or a megaphone (see juliensauctions.com).

→ Sadly review discs didn't turn up in time, but Hammer's new 4K release of *The Quatermass Xperiment* looks good. *Quatermass 2* follows on 14 July, and they're also selling some very nice reproduction quad posters (a snip at £40) – see bit.ly/quatermasscollection.

→ Finally got around to reading *Julia*, Sandra Newman's retelling of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from the female perspective, and it is excellent. Highly recommended.

RANTS

→ Every *Doctor Who* actor who pronounced it "O*mee*ga" should have received a corrective slap in the face. Tut.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RAVES

→ Enjoyed *Quint* by Robert Lautner. A Jaws prequel could be a total cheese-bomb in the wrong hands but this was a delight: thrilling, beautifully crafted and with a voice so authentic you can hear Robert Shaw.

→ Currently revisiting the original '70s *Spider-Woman* run. Why has such an intriguing, visually striking character still not made it to live-action?

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ I'm also a *How To Train Your Dragon* sceptic turned believer. One of the rare live-action remakes that adds more depth, emotion and wonder to an already great story.

→ *Resident Alien* is back for its fourth season and it remains one of the funniest and genuinely heartfelt original sci-fi shows out there.

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

JULY 2025

→ NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// LIVING SLUDGE

10 DEAD MAN WALKING

The *28 Years Later* team talk trilogies

Highlights

14
IRONHEART
→ We get a sneak peek into what the future holds for Riri's machinations in the MCU.

18
SUPERMAN
→ Is it a bird? Is it a plane? What we do know is we had to go to CinemaCon to get these insights.

23
STRANGER THINGS
→ We're so back, baby! All the latest news from Hawkins, plus the release date.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Battleworld

The man in charge of the **Predator** franchise on his plan for (other) world domination

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

Dek (Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi). Ant not shown.

DIRECTOR DAN TRACHTENBERG is, as you might have suspected, one of us. The former *Geekdrome* podcast presenter is a self-proclaimed nerd and at the moment the man holding the reins to the *Predator* franchise is *very* animated about headlining at Geek Glastonbury – San Diego Comic-Con's Hall H.

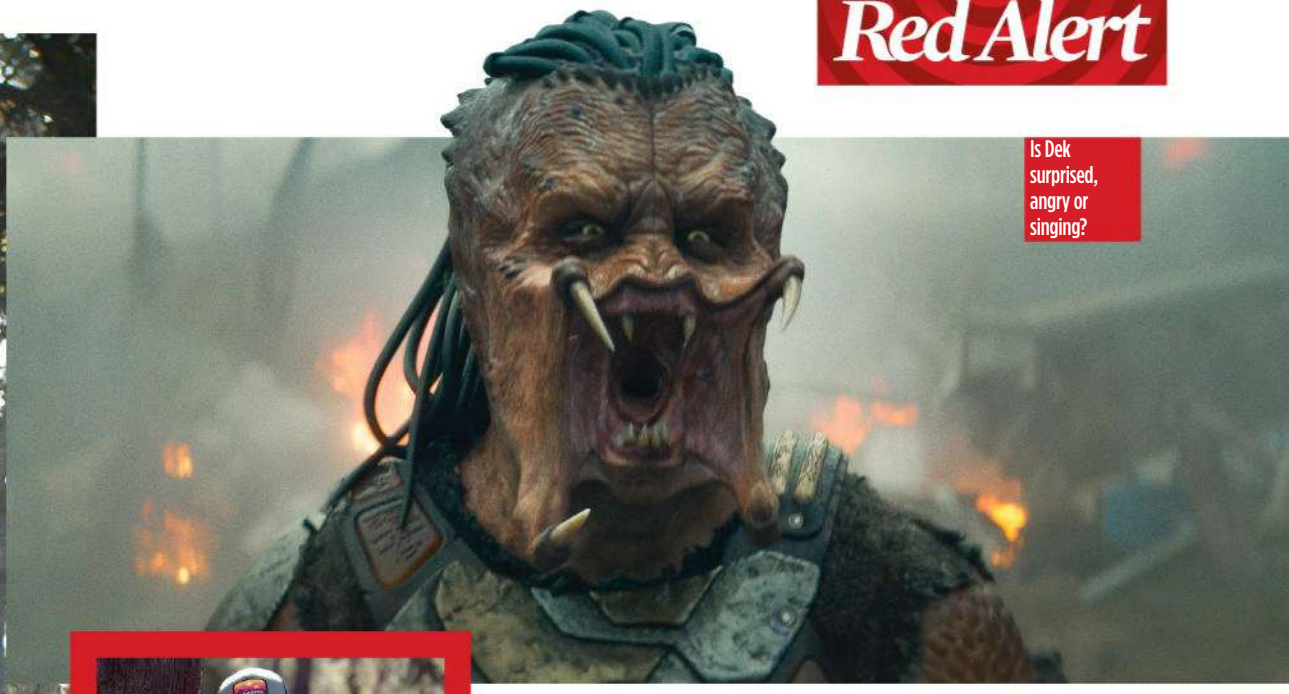
"I went on an 11-year stretch going to Comic-Con, but I haven't been for quite a few years, so I'm very excited to be part of Hall H," he tells Red Alert, promising that *Predator* will be represented with "cool stuff" next month. "I was in there when the Avengers assembled, I was in there for the pen stabbing [prior to the *Resident Evil: Afterlife* panel in 2010], I was two rows behind it. I was there for the big *Tron* reveal, that was insane. Some of my most cherished nerd memories are being there in the audience. So it's going to be a real special thing to be up on stage with this movie. I'm *very* excited about what we'll be there with..."

When we catch up, he's days away from the first festival screenings of *Predator: Killer Of Killers* – a surprise animated movie that's now available on Disney+ – and "knee-deep in post-production" on his other movie in the franchise, *Predator: Badlands*, which hits cinemas in November. "We have half-day long – soon to be full-day long – VFX reviews, and

> **"I like what the movie will be. I don't love what I had to engage in to produce them"**

continue to make it cooler and cooler and cooler. So I'm releasing one movie and then *really* in the trenches on the other..."

He laughs when asked if he'll ever make two movies at the same time again. "They say that when women give birth that something is released that makes them forget the pain of it and makes them want to have a kid again. I



Is Dek surprised, angry or singing?

Dan Trachtenberg modelling his summer look.

Thia (Elle Fanning): she's a goddamned robot!

suspect I will have the same thing because right now I am like, 'No way!'

"But the same thing happened when I finished *Prey*," he says of the 2022 film which brought the *10 Cloverfield Lane* director to the arena of the Yautja.

"I was like, 'Never again. The next time I'm making a movie, it will be inside. No animals, no visual effects, just simple, simple, simple.' Then I once again found myself in the wilds, this time in New Zealand with crazy practical and visual effects and all sorts of creatures. So I continue to make the mistake. I like what I like, I like what the movie will be. I don't love what I had to engage in to produce them, but I do love this kind of movie, so I keep chasing it."

What *Badlands* will actually be is still to be revealed, Trachtenberg says. But the recent trailer releases for both movies did the trick in getting the internet talking.

"All of it's insanely exciting. *Killer Of Killers* certainly has connected with the fans and has taken people by surprise. I'm just so excited because the movie really does deliver on all of the things that the trailer sets up. *Badlands*, the reactions have been across the board, and it's on par for where the movie is at the moment, in terms of the trailer does not tell you what the story is. It doesn't tell you what the characters are, it doesn't tell you the genre of movie. It's just a *vibe*, which allows people to extract or imbue whatever they want. Thankfully, I've seen mostly excitement."

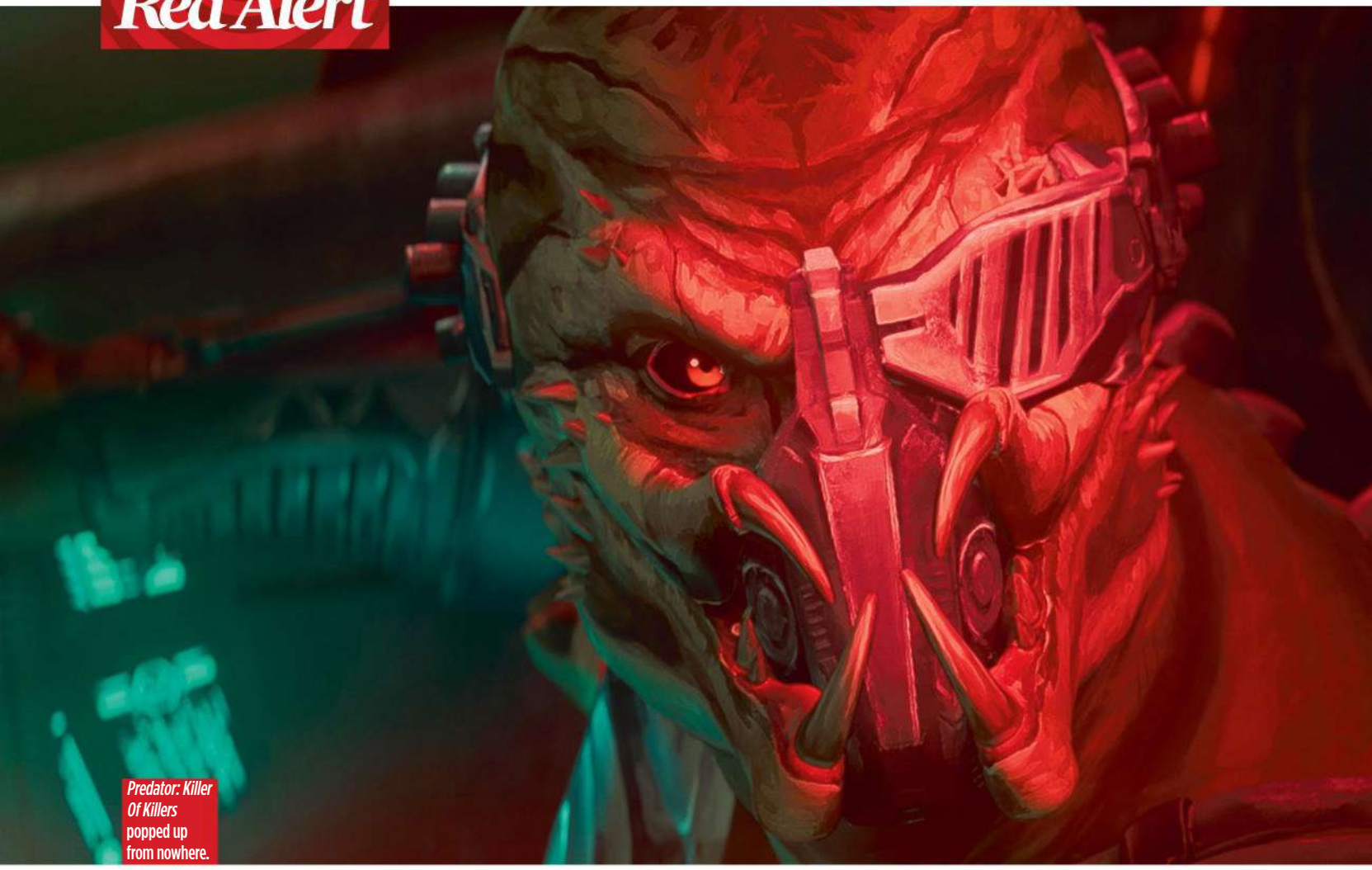
One of several surprises in the teaser trailer for *Predator: Badlands* – which has had nearly 10 million views in a month – was that the Predator was clearly shown, including scenes without a mask. Cut to the comments section...

"I know the reaction to Predator design has *always* been exciting for fans to debate," Trachtenberg smiles. "I've been a part of those debates. Every single movie has had them. *Prey* avoided the Predator design debate because we didn't show the Predator in any of the marketing materials and certainly not what it looked like unmasked. But that's always going to be the case. We've screened the movie a number of times, and the design and the look has never really come up as a source of feedback.

"Hanging out in nature" takes on a new meaning.

"The movie kind of teaches you how to watch it and I know traditionally the Predator has just been a creature. Now it's a character and that just takes some adjusting to. But the cool thing is, when more and more materials come out for the movie, people will see that it is not just a slasher movie. It is not a generic sci-fi movie. It really is a hardcore, brutal →

SCI-FACT! **A new Marvel Comics miniseries, *Predator Kills The Marvel Universe*, is released this August.**



Predator: Killer Of Killers popped up from nowhere.

survival tale, but also really fun, crazy fun," he laughs. "Soon there will be more trailers and people will get a better sense of the movie, but I was stoked to have it finally out there in a way, because we've been holding on to it for so long."

YOU YAUTJA KNOW

Not only did the trailer reveal the unmasked Yautja, it also revealed the involvement of *Alien* universe corporation Weyland-Yutani in a literal blink and you'll miss it moment with lead humanoid Thia, played by Elle Fanning. But why reveal their involvement at all?

"My favourite TV is when there's a thing in them that I assume was going to be the mystery for the entire season and then that mystery is addressed at the end of episode two, and then there's a new thing," Trachtenberg explains. "It's a real signal that's like, 'Oh wow, this show has a lot in store for me.'

"There's just *so much* to get out about the movie that we want to excite people about that [rather than] holding on to just the Weyland-Yutani nugget. There's still so much more. So we just wanted to make sure that there was a little bit of a nugget for people to chew on at first and then we get more to display as we go on."

He says that despite reading a lot of reactions to the trailer online – "I love paying attention to how people are reacting to stuff" – he doesn't think there's anything eagle-eyed fans have missed. In fact, they've dug out more.

> **"There is definitely a third thing that I'd love to get to when Badlands is finished"**

"Not just Elle's eyes, but people zoomed in on seeing Weyland-Yutani logos in the background on trucks and things like that. So I think the internet's going to source it one way or not.

"We told Elle that we were going to hold back a little bit on her character. I said, 'Trust me, we just have a little thingy and the internet's going to discover it.' Five minutes after the trailer came out I texted her like, 'See, that happened. They know now, you know?'"

Michael Biehn voiced *Killer Of Killers*' WW2 pilot.

With the involvement of Weyland-Yutani out there, has he had a chance – or even a need – to see any of Noah Hawley's upcoming *Alien: Earth* TV series?

"Mmm. What a question," he grins broadly, then laughs. "I have seen some *Alien: Earth* and it's pretty effing awesome what I've seen. I don't want to speak for someone else's project, but I was blown away by how many great premises it has. It's not just *Alien* on Earth. It's actually a couple of *great* ideas for a show and for an Alien Universe thing."

Neatly sidestepped – but what about more Predator, birth pains permitting?

"The honest answer to that is after *Prey* came out, and I started thinking about sequel stuff, there were three ideas that I had. *Killers* is one, *Badlands* is two and the third one is something else. The reason why I felt possessed to make them and sort of why I rushed – I did two at once because I could do, I could multitask with animation – was because I was so eager to get to the third thing.

"There's a lot of cool ideas out there and none of them are just like, 'Oh, we have to say the next part of this story because it was successful.' All of it is like, 'Whoa, no one has done that in sci-fi. No one has done that in *Predator*. No one's done that with the creature,' all of those ideas are generated from that instinct. So,

A bold take on the *God Of War* look. Well done.

More from *Killer Of Killers*: ninja doom awaits!

Badlands promises a unique take on the franchise.

BADLANDS BREAKDOWN

What we know about the next Predator movie

- *Badlands* is set on a remote planet in the future, where a young Predator named Dek seeks the ultimate adversary to prove himself to his clan.
- Dek is an outcast from the Yautja. He is played by stuntman Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi.
- Dek teams up with Weyland-Yutani artificial human Thia, played by Elle Fanning.
- Dek's body was created by Studio Gillis, while his face was digitally enhanced using motion capture computer technology, allowing a unique array of emotional expressions.
- A complete written and verbal language for the Yautja species was realised by the same linguist who created the Na'vi language for the original *Avatar* movie.
- Wētā Workshop worked on practical effects and designs for the movie.
- It filmed in New Zealand between August and October 2024 under the working title *Backpack*.
- Director Dan Trachtenberg said every shot of the film required visual effects work.

yeah, there is definitely a third thing that I'd love to get to when *Badlands* is finished."

What about if we could squeeze in something else, a 2.5 if you will, and see the director turn his hand to a prequel for the Marvel Comics *Predator* series?

"It's possible, yeah, that has come up," he revals. "Not with *Prey*, but now that I've been on these two movies that has come up and it really, for me, is about time allotment at the moment. But I grew up reading comics. My first thoughts when learning that you could have a job growing up was to be a comic book writer. It was: comic book writer, make videogames or make movies, it was going to be one of those three things. So yeah, I would love to figure that out for sure."

So he can find time to make two films at once, but you can't just throw a comic book into the mix?

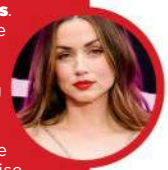
"I know! What kind of an asshole am I?!"

Predator: Killer Of Killers is on Disney+ now. Predator: Badlands is in cinemas from 7 November.

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- **Avengers: Doomsday** bumped to 18 December 2026 with **Avengers: Secret Wars** now following 17 December 2027.
- Elizabeth Olsen, Kristen Stewart and Oscar Isaac to star in vampire thriller **Flesh Of The Gods**.
- Ana de Armas tipped for Doug Liman's **Deeper** alongside Tom Cruise.
- *Thunderbolts** director Jake Schreier in the frame for **X-Men**.
- **The Lord Of The Rings: The Hunt For Gollum** arrives 17 December 2027.
- Maika Monroe joins historical horror **Victorian Psycho**.
- Alex Garland to direct videogame adaptation **Elden Ring**.
- Ralph Fiennes is President Snow in **The Hunger Games: Sunrise On The Reaping**.
- Sequel **Super Mario World** targeting a 3 April 2026 release.
- **Whac-A-Mole** heading for the big screen.
- *The Fall Guy*'s David Leitch in talks to helm live-action **Gears Of War**.
- Eli Roth to make summer town horror **Ice Cream Man**.
- *Wednesday's* Hunter Doohan joining Souheila Yacoub and *Pearl*'s Tandi Wright in **Evil Dead Burn**.



KATE GREEN/GETTY

Run for your life before you get a bite taken out of you.

DIRECTOR INTERVIEW

Reality Bites

Danny Boyle returns to horror with **28 Years Later** – and there's a sequel already in the can

WORDS: **ADAM TANSWELL**

DANNY BOYLE HAS A TWINKLE in his eye. "Age is no indication of maturity," the 68-year-old director says, rather mischievously. The Academy Award winner is standing on stage to speak about his new movie, *28 Years Later*, and the audience is lapping it up.

The post-apocalyptic project is a follow-up to the acclaimed British horror *28 Days Later* and its 2007 sequel *28 Weeks Later* – and Boyle is in the perfect mood to describe what film fans can expect from the "infectious" third movie. "I still love an apocalypse, British style," he says with a smile. "I love killing the Infected, or zombies, if you like. And I still love blowing shit up. You know, that's how my agent describes my best stuff."

While development of the third film in the *28 Days Later* franchise was initially confirmed back in 2007, it's taken 18 years for the project to finally reach the big screen. After several hiccups and production delays, Boyle returns to the director's seat, with Alex Garland as screenwriter, and plans for this to be just the first movie in a new horror trilogy telling the continuing story of the Rage virus.

"Alex and I set out to make three films in this apocalyptic world," confirms Boyle. "Each one stands alone, but they're all linked together – principally through the casting."

> **"I love killing the Infected, or zombies, if you like. And I still love blowing shit up"**

The impressive cast list includes A-listers such as Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Jodie Comer, Ralph Fiennes and Jack O'Connell, as well as 12-year-old newcomer Alfie Williams. "Oh, and Cillian Murphy," adds Boyle. "Although, like all good things in life, you may have to wait a little while for him to make his appearance."

Appetite for the third film is clearly ravenous, with the first trailer receiving more than 10 million views on YouTube in just 48 hours. This early footage introduced a slew of Infected characters – from quick-footed, frenzied attackers through to a severely emaciated figure who pops up unexpectedly in a field. This was initially thought to be Cillian Murphy, until the rumour was debunked.

In terms of horror, the *Trainspotting* director promises an asphyxiating sense of tension and genre-pushing scares. "When you're doing a movie, you're looking for those images that will terrify people," says Boyle. "There's a visceral element to cinema where you have a responsibility to push the envelope as far as you can go. I want that sense of suffocating intensity."

No, it's not Cillian – it's a chap called Angus Neill.

The world has undergone some changes since the outbreak.

Boyle directing his cast in apocalypse survival.

Fiennes will return in sequel *The Bone Temple*.

The trailers also reveal a peek at one of the story's intriguing new settings, Holy Island. "We tried imagining how a world would rebuild itself after an apocalypse," explains Boyle. "Holy Island, which is where our film begins, is protected by a causeway that you can defend – but there's a lack of machinery. There's no electricity or fuel. Everything that surrounds our life is now suddenly useless. The mainland then becomes somewhere over there, which has both promise and threat."

BONES AND ALL

28 Years Later is primed and ready for its worldwide premiere in June, but there's clearly more to come. In fact, a sequel – *28 Years Later: The Bone Temple* – has already been shot, with *Candyman* and *The Marvels* director Nia DaCosta in the director's chair, Garland on writing duties and Boyle taking a producer credit.

DaCosta is no stranger to the virus-fuelled franchise. "Growing up, *28 Days Later* was one of the 12 DVDs I had in my house," she explains. "I watched it over and over and over again – and I found love for it more and more each time. It made me truly understand that movies can look like anything, so I've tried to bring as much of that feeling to *The Bone Temple* as I can."

Speaking about her inspirations, DaCosta adds: "While the movie is very much informed by *28 Years Later*, the script for *The Bone Temple* is very different. I was able to bring a different approach to it and let my freak flag fly in the way I've learned from Danny."

The *Little Woods* director remains tight-lipped regarding any specific plot points – but a top-secret movie shot featuring Ralph Fiennes was revealed by DaCosta at a CinemaCon panel earlier this year, which drew rapturous cheers from the crowd. "You've seen Ralph Fiennes in a lot of different roles, my current fave being the gossiping cardinal of *Conclave*," she admits. "But you've never seen him like this. I can't wait for you to see the scene. When I read it, I was like, 'Oh, Alex!' It's actually insane."

Red Alert was in attendance at CinemaCon, where Boyle went on to ask the audience for help in pushing the new horror trilogy. "We don't have finance for the third yet," the British director declared. "So please support the continuing apocalypse and I might get to come back here – as immature as ever – with the third film next year." Fingers crossed.

28 Years Later is in cinemas from 20 June. 28 Years Later: The Bone Temple is in cinemas from 16 January 2026.

SCI-FACT! **Mercury-winning Scottish trio Young Fathers have scored *28 Years Later*. *Joker*'s Hildur Guðnadóttir is scoring *The Bone Temple*.**

SCI-FACT! ***28 Years Later*** **was shot entirely on iPhone 15 Pro Max, using up to 20 handsets at once.**

ACTOR EXCLUSIVE

In Your Head (Zombie)

28 Years Later's Sam Locke talks (as much as he can) about Danny Boyle's secretive sequel

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

Sam Locke stars in the latest instalment of the horror franchise

SAM LOCKE REALLY WANTS TO talk about his role in *28 Years Later* – the entire reason *SFX* has called the actor – but something's caught his tongue. "I can't give too much away," he says with regret. "I wish I could." Fortunately, though, after some light interrogation, a few details about Danny Boyle's secretive sequel do slip out.

First, Locke says that his unnamed character, who we have yet to see in any marketing material, is part of a "very exciting" group, adding that the way they are introduced "is going to be a conversation starter". Pressed on whether that means his character is on the "safe" island, where we meet Jodie Comer and Aaron Taylor-Johnson's survivors, Locke says he is not based there.

"I didn't get to work that closely with Jodie or Aaron, but a lot of my time was spent with Jack O'Connell," he says. "Not only is he like a proper geezer, he's a down-to-earth guy, and he's so generous in the way he acts."

Rumours have swirled that O'Connell, recently seen in *Sinners*, is playing a terrifying cult leader called Sir Jimmy Crystal. While Locke cannot confirm or deny these reports, his character will have a run-in with a rabid group of the Infected, and the filming experience was quite something.

"We collide," he says. "We were kept apart [from the "Infected" actors] until that moment, which was really fun, and allowed us to evoke emotions naturally. The emotions and the fear, the energy, the adrenaline, it was natural and instinctual."

Locke – who previously appeared in the TV series *The Way* and *Itopia* – reveals that he bonded with the other actors in his character's group (which may or may not be a cult) over weeks of stunt training. "The reason we needed stunt training is..." He pauses for a second. "It's not a giveaway to say that our characters are full of vigour and energy. So we needed the stunt training to not only know how to endure our roles, but also, it facilitated massively the team-building and bonding."

Boyle's presence behind the camera added to the experience. "You can imagine, this being a Danny Boyle film, the action sequences being intense," Locke says. "Danny knows what he wants, he's a brilliant director, but the thing that heightens the intensity of his scenes is how he is as a director. He's behind the screen, ducking and diving from the Infected as if he's watching it as an audience member. The energy he likes to conjure up and create ultimately rubbed off on the shoot."

The set they worked on was, Locke says, surreal. "It was comprised of natural elements and a few non-natural elements, but it was outdoors," he teases. "I've worked on TV, but this was another level. And the makeup department killed it."

He can say no more. "It feels huge," he says. "I'm excited for this to come out first, and for the world to enjoy it, and then we can talk about it."

28 Years Later is in cinemas from 20 June.

TWO CATS IN THE YARD PHOTOGRAPHY

SCI-FACT! ***The Toxic Avenger*** **also inspired a children's cartoon series,** ***Toxic Crusaders*****, which ran for 13 episodes in 1991.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Earth's Grimiest Hero

Before making his cinematic return, **The Toxic Avenger** is back in two new comics

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AHEAD OF PETER Dinklage bringing janitor-turned-mutant vigilante Winston Gooze to putrid life on the big screen later this year, Ahoy Comics is following up its recent *Toxic Avenger* miniseries. This means not only a new monthly title but also the five-issue *Toxie Team-Up*, in which he encounters other characters from the publisher's eclectic stable – beginning in issue one with the Son of God himself.

"I wasn't sure how I was going to pull it off because Toxie and Jesus seem like such opposites, at least style-wise," says writer Mark Russell, who is reunited with his *Second Coming* artist Richard Pace. "But as I started writing, it occurred to me what this story is really about – which is how it's easy to get people riled up over crime but almost impossible to get them to do anything about injustice, even though it's a far bigger problem.

"That becomes Jesus's mission: to get Toxie as angry about the money changers and polluters as he does about purse snatchers or street bullies."

"Like the Jersey Devil, Toxie is from Jersey, so it's the most natural team-up in the world – the modern, chemically-created monster vs the ancient mythical dude," adds Stuart Moore, who is scripting the Project Cryptid-themed issue two for artist Ryan Kelly. "It's about two guys who meet in a diner and throw down, which is a story as old as time just like *Tromeo And Juliet*."

Self-contained and each drawn by a different artist, the first five issues explore a variety of genres. "The Toxic Avenger has always been about a mix of approaches: horror, comedy or superhero parody, and you even had the romance between Toxie and Claire in the original movies," says writer Matt Bors. "But all of them feel like they're part of *The Toxic Avenger*: they're still a bit gory and violent and have the satire that people have come to expect. The crime issue is gritty and noir-ish, while the romance issue earnestly tackles the budding relationship between Toxie and Yvonne."

Toxic Avenger Comics takes place in a separate milieu to Macon Blair's upcoming film. "Our story doesn't relate to the new movie but if you're itching for a new take on Toxie then this book will scratch an itch," explains Bors, who picks up immediately where the previous five-parter left off.

"The Toxic Crusaders were formed in the wake of the 'Adverse Discharge Event' that turned them into mutants," he continues. "Tromaville is rotting away, as it's isolated and polluted and people are getting even kookier than they were in the first volume.

> **"It's about two guys who meet in a diner and throw down"**

"Each issue deals with that fallout as new problems such as gangs, mutations and killer robots spout up after what's happened. There's also an overarching plot line, and in each issue there's a two-page story illustrated by Fred Harper.

"This sets up the story, as a senator is on a fact-finding mission to discover what happened in Tromaville, which leads into the second arc, *Toxie Goes To Washington*."

Toxie Team-Up is out now. Toxic Avenger Comics is out on 9 July.

_AINE_\GETTY (1)

Riri Williams suits up in the lead role of this new miniseries.

PRODUCER EXCLUSIVE

Testing Her Metal

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

How **Ironheart** gives Riri Williams the opportunity to choose her path in the MCU

IT'S BEEN ALMOST three years since we last saw genius MIT student Riri Williams/Ironheart (Dominique Thorne) in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, suiting up to fight alongside the Wakandans against King Namor and his Talokan warriors. And after that life-changing experience, Williams returned to her academic life sans suit, where she was left to figure out what's next.

In the long-awaited Disney+ series *Ironheart*, audiences will get to see Williams figure out how to stake out her place in Chicago and the world of superheroes. Since she was introduced into the MCU by director Ryan Coogler, he and his production shingle, Proximity Media, have been key in helping to creatively define her Disney+ series.

Co-executive producer Sev Ohanian tells Red Alert that they worked closely with Marvel Studios executive producers Kevin Feige and Zoie Nagelhout, and series head writer Chinaka Hodge to flesh out this young heroine's broader story.

"Riri is a character that we all love dearly," Ohanian says. "What's also exciting about her is that she was brought to the page by Brian Michael Bendis, then Eve Ewing had a great run with her, but she's not a character that has a long story existence in publication. T'Challa and Black Panther have been around for decades. Riri is a more recent character. It felt like there was an opportunity to tell a new story, one that we, along with Marvel and Chinaka and our brilliant directors, could have a little bit more ownership over."

In the series, Williams is bristling at MIT restrictions, broke and confused about where she can best apply her genius to upgrade her life. "As with anything with Marvel, it's always a matter of what can we do that hasn't quite been done before. I'm really proud of the angle that the team came up with for this character, which was to do a real character study," Ohanian explains. "Riri is brilliant yet flawed and finds herself going down a path that I'm not sure we've quite seen in the MCU. She kind of breaks bad in the show, and we go to some uncomfortable places for audiences that I think will be really fun to explore, almost in the vein of Walter White from *Breaking Bad* or Tony Soprano."

> "She's not a character that has a long existence in publication"

To give the series a female-centric voice and point of view, the producer brought in Hodge, their former USC film school classmate, who Ohanian says immediately landed the voice of Williams. "She 1,000% was able to embody that character and worked with Dominique to really bring her into the show," they say.

Ohanian adds that *Ironheart* is the rare satellite story in the

Riri needs to find her place in the world of heroes.

The Hood (Anthony Ramos) works his magic.

MCU where Williams is outside of the narrative hubs of New York City, London or Wakanda. "This show is going to take Riri on a bit of an adventure in Chicago," they say. "Almost immediately, she makes it back home. For this character, home is a complicated place because while she has amazing memories there, it's also the source of some of her deep-rooted trauma that we'll be able to explore in the show. There's criminal activities that may or may not be happening that'll be taking us to all sorts of elements of the city."

That's especially dangerous because Williams doesn't have a Tony Stark mentor, or even a Happy Hogan liaison figure like fellow young genius Peter Parker does, to help her find her way. "I think that allows us to give her some really interesting relationship dynamics with the other characters of the show," Ohanian says of Williams' series journey to find her best allies. "We've got such a great, compelling dynamic with Parker Robbins, played by Anthony Ramos."

Parker/The Hood represents street-level power, as he wields magic to woo exceptional talent like Williams; fellow outcasts he'll use to build his own epicentre of power. "Their relationship is going to evolve almost on an episode-by-episode basis," Ohanian continues. "As well as other characters that I don't know how many I can speak about. But I think that vacuum of having a mentorship character allowed us to really explore a very rich and complicated situation with everyone else."

Ohanian promises Williams will choose her path by the end of *Ironheart*, and it will set her up for future MCU stories. "I have heard on good authority that the characters will carry on in the MCU, whether it's movies or TV shows. We absolutely have a complete story that has a beginning, middle and end that also launches us into some interesting directions that will get picked up in the future."

Ironheart is on Disney+ from 24 June.

With no mentor, Riri has to rely on her friends.

SCI-FACT! **Director Sam Bailey is from Chicago, and was chosen partly for her ability to tell local-flavoured stories.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ *Star Wars: Skeleton Crew*'s Ryan Kiera Armstrong takes the lead in the **Buffy The Vampire Slayer** revival.

→ Krysten Ritter returns as Jessica Jones in season two of **Daredevil: Born Again**.

→ Prime Video axing **The Wheel Of Time** after three seasons.

→ *Game Of Thrones* spin-off **A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms** pushed back to early 2026.

→ FX's **Alien: Earth** to launch with a two-episode premiere on 12 August.

→ Tantoo Cardinal and Jon Jon Briones joining season three of the live-action **Avatar: The Last Airbender**.

→ **Fallout** renewed for a third season.

→ **Josh Hartnett** to produce and star in a Netflix limited series about a mysterious sea creature terrorising a coastal town.

→ Josh Heuston reveals that filming on **Dune: Prophecy** season two begins this August.

→ Kevin Bacon's **The Bondsman** cancelled after one season.

→ Netflix to turn mobile strategy game **Clash Of Clans** into an animated series.

PAUL ARCHULETA/GETTY

SCI-FACT! **Also out on 18 June: a facsimile edition of 1955's *Adventure Comics* issue 210, in which Krypto made his debut.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Shaggy Superdog Story

Ahead of his movie debut, Krypto flies solo in miniseries

The Last Dog Of Krypton

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

SET TO BE THE breakout star of James Gunn's *Superman*, Krypto the Superdog is now appearing in a brand new miniseries. Charting his journey from a puppy on his now-destroyed home planet to becoming the Man of Steel's faithful canine companion, *The Last Dog Of Krypton* delves into largely unexplored territory compared to Superman and Supergirl's more familiar formative days.

"We know exactly what happened to Clark and Kara from birth to Earth, but with Krypto there's many more blank spaces on the map," says writer Ryan North. "I saw an opportunity to tell a really heartfelt story, and the chance to do it from the point of view of a poor lost dog, all alone on an alien world called Earth."

The series is a quartet of standalone tales, and North envisaged each issue as a chapter in the tale of how Krypto travelled from Krypton to Metropolis. "They're each vignettes in the larger story of the year he spends on Earth without finding Clark," explains North. "Small spoiler: we get to see what Metropolis looks like from the point of view of a stray pooch." While according to artist Mike Norton, "Ryan really

One of the variant covers, by Jae Lee.

made a point of showing Krypto learning his yellow sun abilities," his enhanced Superdog abilities emerge gradually over time. "They arrive just as Clark's did, which is not right away and not all at once," adds North. "He will eventually have all the powers he normally does, but that's not where he starts, and there's absolutely a story in how that comes about."

Unable to fall back on traditional conversation, North found scripting such a non-verbal character both difficult and rewarding. "It's not as difficult as you'd think," he continues, having tapped into his own interactions with canines.

"Dogs communicate their emotions to us without words, so we use the same techniques with Krypto. There's something that makes him so real when Krypto is actually a dog with no English words in thought balloons or dialogue – just big expressive eyes, a tail that can wag or be tucked between his legs, and ears that can be alert or afraid.

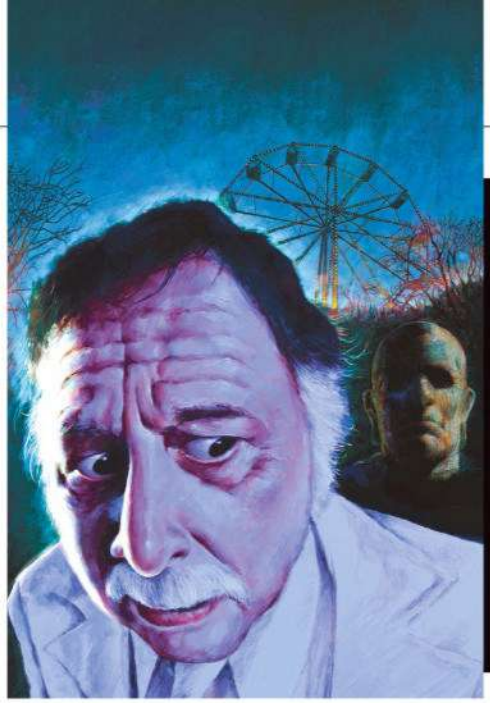
"Dogs have evolved to communicate with us and they do it in tons of ways, and telling a story this way helps Krypto seem more real."

A BREED APART

Admitting that he is "one of those crazy dog people", Norton has previously depicted pooch protagonists in his creator-owned series *Grumble* and *Battlepug*. "I've seen a lot of 'origin of Superman' stories but not many for how Krypto got here," he says, having not modelled him on any particular pedigree.

"It was important to get a handle on just what Krypto is," he adds. "He has been drawn as many different breeds in the past, Pitbull-like, German Shepherd and probably mostly as a white labrador. I've tried to use an aspect of all of those with a healthy dose of the upcoming movie version, which is based on James Gunn's own dog. So in the end, Krypto is the best breed there is – mutt!"

Krypto: The Last Dog Of Krypton is out on 18 June.



HERE YOU GO.
THANKS.
IS THAT LIKE YOUR MASCOT OR SOMETHING?
BY THE WAY, WHAT'S WITH THE CAROUSEL?
GOOD MORNING.
MORNING. I'LL TAKE A PEPPERMINT MOCHA, PLEASE. LARGE.
YEAH, IT'S FROM SOME OLD AMUSEMENT PARK.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Fairground Distraction

George A Romero's once-lost film **The Amusement Park** is now a graphic novel WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

HAVING BEEN FRIENDS AND admirers of each other's oeuvres, John Carpenter and the late George A Romero often discussed working together. A collaboration never came to pass, but Storm King Comics – which Carpenter runs with his wife Sandy King – is now partnering with the George A Romero Foundation to publish a graphic novel of the director's 1973 film *The Amusement Park*.

Believed lost for decades until its discovery in 2017, it was commissioned as an educational film about the treatment of the elderly, and followed a senior visiting a strange amusement park where he's variously patronised, ignored and menaced. Writer Jeff Whitehead and artist Ryan Carr have now updated it, adding the framing device of a businessman in his twenties being told about the park by an elderly man.

"After we finished restoring *The Amusement Park*, George's wife Suzanne and I started to ruminate on how relevant the story was today," Whitehead tells Red Alert. "How forward-thinking the narrative was, how experimental and interesting it was given the original scope. We began discussing how to modernise the film so that it was not just a reflection of George's body of work or a window into 1973.

"Given that we couldn't remake the film itself or alter the original content, we discussed moving the medium and retrofitting it to graphic novel format, allowing the more public service-oriented content at the beginning and end of the film to be told through a new narrative."

With no source beyond the film itself, Whitehead had very little additional material. "The original script is more of a treatment in modern terms, charting the general course for the film's arc but without any dialogue or major scene beats," he explains. "We obviously used the original film as a backbone, highlighting certain characters that represent different aspects of life, love, happiness, fear, anxiety and death.

"I painstakingly wrote the actual script of the film by progressing scene by scene. From that script, I then created new endcaps that would have a more universal reflection of our modern world in an attempt to make the story as different as I imagine George intended it to be."

The fairground can be seen as a microcosm of US life. "Although it was never stated by Romero, that was exactly what he intended," says Whitehead. "By turning this American archetype on its head, Romero took a place that was viewed as family-friendly, safe and entertaining and made it perilous. Each attraction is skewed so that recognisable favourites became harrowing experiences in ageing."

"Ageism is at the core of *The Amusement Park*, and the park itself is a metaphor for a society that builds these constructs to abuse and belittle its own citizens when it has found them to be too old and non-essential, which will happen to all of us," adds Carr. "In these themes, it has archetypal value similar to Stephen King as there are dreamscape properties that act as deep, subconscious representations, using satire and horror to shed light on the world around us."

John Carpenter Presents George A Romero's The Amusement Park is out now.

SCI-FACT! **While lead character William Lincoln resembles original actor Lincoln Maazel, Ryan Carr modelled other characters on Romero.**

CREATIVES INTERVIEW

The Krypton Factor

James Gunn and the cast of **Superman** talk Clark Kent, Kal-El, kaiju and kindness

WORDS: **ADAM TANSWELL**

A Kryptonian's best friend: a pup with superpowers.

WITH A SUPERHERO STORY including distinct new elements that director, producer and writer James Gunn promises we've never seen in a Man of Steel movie before, the buzz is definitely building for *Superman*. Flying dog? Check. Giant kaiju? Absolutely. Pocket universes? You've got it. Science and sorcery? Sure thing. Max Fleischer cartoon inspirations? No question about it. Yep, Red Alert is super-hyped for DC Studios' *Superman*.

"I really do believe in this movie," enthuses Gunn, speaking at a presentation to promote the blockbuster. "*Superman* is a movie that celebrates kindness and human love. When somebody goes to my movies, I want them to walk out with a magical feeling that we all know we experience from seeing a movie we love. Honestly, that's the most important thing for me."

"There's something in the movie for everyone," adds Rachel Brosnahan, who plays Lois Lane. "There's an epic adventure. There's an epic love story. There's an epic score. Also, the cool thing about Superman is the fact that he's a cool guy who does the right thing because it's the right thing to do – but it's also cool to do the right thing. I feel like we can use a little bit more of that idea in the world right now."

The privilege of playing Superman (and Clark Kent) is not lost on David Corenswet. The *Twisters* and *Hollywood* star joins a long list of actors who have tackled the iconic role – including Kirk Alyn, Christopher Reeve, Henry Cavill, Tom Welling and Brandon Routh, among others. The thrill of lighting up the big screen as Kal-El is clearly something that makes the 31-year-old proud.

"It's a great honour to play a role that exists so clearly in the public consciousness," explains Corenswet. "Even if you haven't seen a film or

James Gunn: "I could take both of you wimps."

SUPER SIZE MOVIE

→ DC Studios' co-chairmen James Gunn and Peter Safran hope audiences experience *Superman* on the biggest screens possible. "As filmmakers and life-long movie fans, we want these movies to be seen the way they were meant to be seen," explains Safran. "On a huge screen in a darkened theatre with a crystal-clear picture and immersive, seat-shaking sound. That's the experience we fell in love with as kids, and it's the fulcrum of our ambitious DC Studios slate. That's what inspired James to shoot all over the world and push filmmaking technology to its limits, to propel movie-goers out of their homes into theatres and up into the skies over Metropolis with Superman." Bring it on.

read a comic, you know what the Superman symbol means and you know what it stands for. You also know about Lois Lane and Lex Luthor. They've become archetypes."

Corenswet is humble, charming and thoughtful as he speaks passionately about the project: "There are so many great actors and artists and writers and directors who have excavated different parts of the characters and added to their shrine in the public's perception that it feels like you're riding a tidal wave of good vibes and great creative choices. You just want to illuminate something new about the character or even just bring the beloved character to a new audience and generation – and hopefully give them that first experience with the character that turned those of us who are fans into fans in the first place."

"These stories endure because there's something in them for everyone," continues Brosnahan, who also feels the privilege of playing an icon from movies, television and the comic book world. "We get to stand on the shoulders of giants, on the shoulders of these amazing actors who played these roles before us, and then find our own way into their heads with a road map, which is the script that James beautifully wrote."

> **"It's a great honour to play a role that exists so clearly in the public consciousness"**

Speaking of the script, Nicholas Hoult – who plays Lex Luthor – describes it as "perfect". "James' understanding of this rich world is crazy," the *X-Men* actor enthuses. "It's been a great joy for me to work on."

So what do the actors hope audiences take away from the blockbuster when it's finally released in cinemas across the globe? "My hope is that they want to see it again – and that's not just to sell more tickets," chuckles Corenswet. "My favourite movies are the ones where you come to the end, the lights come up in the theatre and you think back to the beginning of the film and you realise what a journey you went on. There were highs and lows, there was heartbreak and loss and there were times you feared for the characters that you loved – but in the end there was triumph and hope and a sense of being able to take anything on."

Closing out the presentation, Corenswet concludes: "I love it when you leave the theatre and there's a feeling of, 'I just want to get back in line and ride that roller coaster again.' That's how I felt with the trailer. I just wanted to watch it again and again just to go through that ride again. And I did."

Superman is in cinemas from 11 July.

SCI-FACT! Nicholas Hoult (Lex Luthor) also auditioned for Superman – and previously auditioned to play Batman for Matt Reeves.

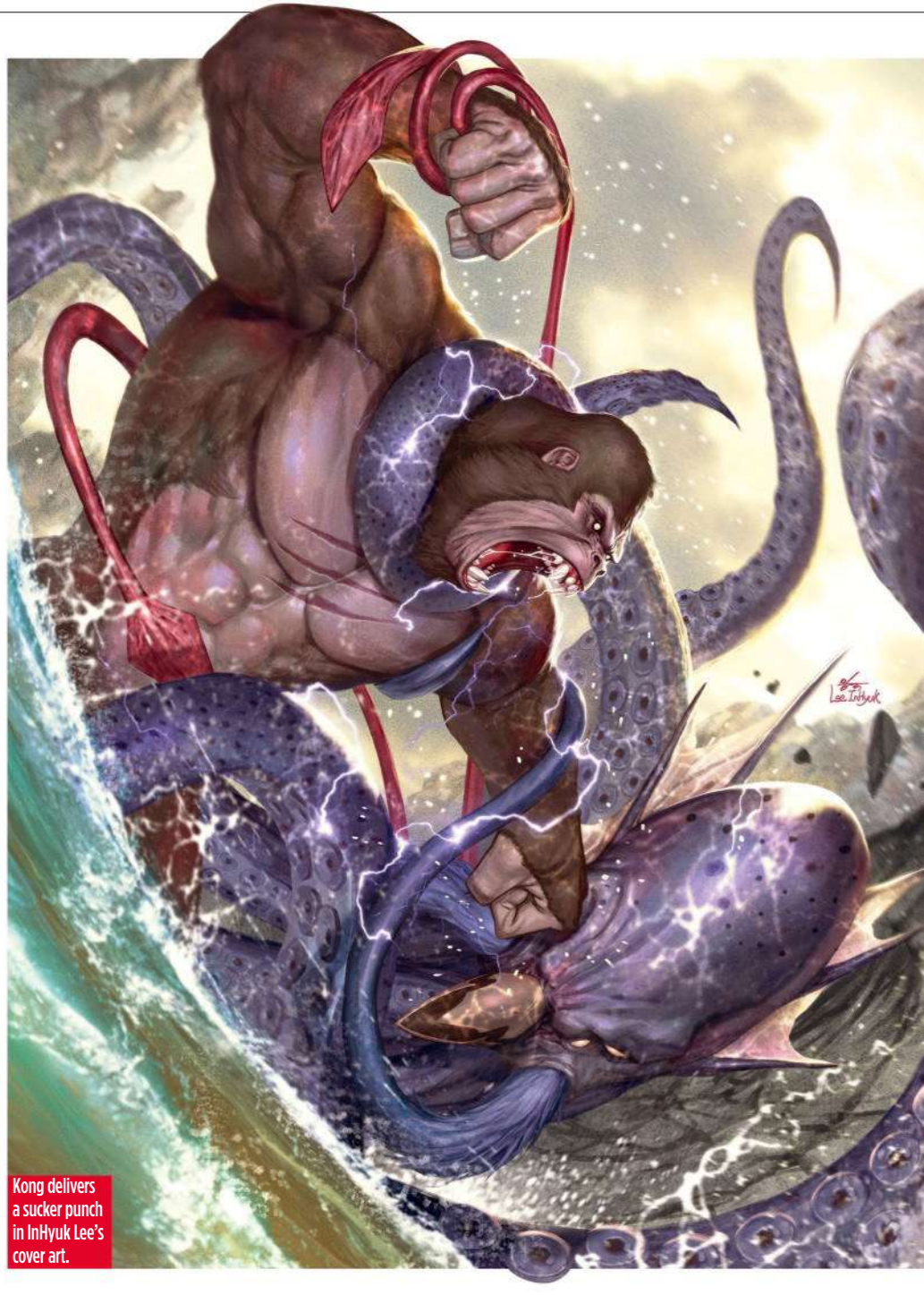
SCI-FACT! **The name Skull Island is never used in the 1933 *King Kong* (though "Skull Mountain" is mentioned), or sequel *Son Of Kong*.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Fantasy Island

Titan Comics return to **Skull Island** in a new comic book sequel

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



Kong delivers a sucker punch in InHyuk Lee's cover art.

WHILE THERE'S NO SECOND season of Netflix's *Skull Island*, any leftover plotlines are explored in Titan Comics' new *Return To Skull Island* four-parter, which writer Simon Furman describes as "the next phase" of the animated series.

"We start in a very entry level way for new readers as Charlie is our guide and the voice of our 'previously on *Skull Island*'," says Furman, referring to one of the younger members of the group of travellers who are shipwrecked on the South Pacific island after encountering mysterious young girl Annie. "So we're very quickly up to date and motoring into a fresh story. Like all the Legendary stuff, this is very imbedded in the wider mythos of the MonsterVerse, and we go deep into that in the series."

Furman is highlighting some previously unseen aspects of King Kong's hidden homeland. "As I got further into the story, I started to explore not only Skull Island more but also the sister island where Annie grew up," he explains. "To me, second to Kong of course, the island is the star of the show, so it was great to be able to define it a little more – what's where and other notable landmarks – and how the various locations jigsaw together. There's even a map in one issue, as via the native islanders we meet in the series we start giving names to places – and things!"

While Furman acknowledges he was "coming into a group dynamic already brilliantly conceived and developed by *Skull Island* lead writer Brian Duffield," he is building on the existing chemistry between the various characters. "I just loved Brian's take on Charlie, Annie, Cap, Mike and the others and didn't need to tamper with it at all," he says. "But the introduction of new characters like Kaia, Guy and Druid gave me some scope to, ahem, monkey around with that group dynamic and maybe push them in new, interesting directions as over the course of this new chunk of *Skull Island*, they grow and develop and you end up liking them a bit more by the end."

And while he isn't Furman's sole focus, expect to see plenty of the great ape himself. "Kong is a big, big presence in the series!" teases Furman. "I wanted him 'on camera' and front and centre in every issue. Kong, to me, is Skull Island and his importance to the island – and below the island! – and everything in this weird eco-system is key to *Return To Skull Island*. We have a monumental new threat to the Skull Island status quo, a Big Bad that reaches all the way back to Kong's youth and past and will test him like never before! If you thought the Kraken was a challenge, wait till you meet Yuggoth!"

Furman is enjoying collaborating with artist Christopher Jones. "The characters and monsters really leap off the page," he says. "When I first saw the double-page spread that called back to the clash between Kong and the Kraken I knew he would breathe incredible life into whatever words I wrote on the page!"

Return To Skull Island is out on 18 June.

SCI-FACT! **Captain America initially joined Earth's Mightiest Heroes in 1964's *The Avengers* issue four.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Hero Reborn

A newly defrosted **Captain America** takes on a young Doctor Doom

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

CONSIDERING THE current turbulent political times, Captain America could be seen as a divisive figure. But now Chip Zdarsky is returning Steve Rogers to his formative days as one of Earth's Mightiest Heroes in a brand new series. Illustrated by Valerio Schiti, it takes place just after he first emerged from the ice after being frozen for decades, but before he joins the Avengers.

"It's really interesting to be writing Steve Rogers right now, and I'm doing my best to stay true to the character," Zdarsky tells Red Alert. "He represents the best of America; the ideals it's always striving for but rarely achieving. In a lot of ways, it makes Steve a kind of tragic but hopeful figure."

Hailing from Ontario, Zdarsky has long been strangely fond of Marvel's Sentinel of Liberty. "Cap was my guy as a kid, which was admittedly weird as a Canadian," he recalls. "My first comics were *Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars*, and Cap was the leader. He couldn't shoot beams out of his eyes or command the weather, but he was still the guy:

> **"Cap was my guy as a kid, which was weird as a Canadian"**

clear-headed, moral, a strategist. I went straight from *Secret Wars* to *Captain America* and was hooked forever."

While Cap has often harked back to his Second World War experiences, his early adventures in the modern Marvel Universe have been relatively neglected. "Yesterday, Steve was a Captain in the army in the middle of a war and today he's thawed out into his future," says Zdarsky. "But he's still a soldier, and in that situation the first thing he'd do is return to base, whatever that looks like. So this is about him seeing what the global situation is now, through the lens of the US military."

Ben Harvey's main cover for the first issue.

Although Cap was first revived in the early '60s, Zdarsky isn't opting for a period feel. "Steve came out of the ice roughly 10 years ago in the Marvel timeline," he explains. "It would be weird to date it by having people walking around with selfie sticks and talking about Tumblr – though maybe we could do some cool 'Remember the mid-2000s?' variants."

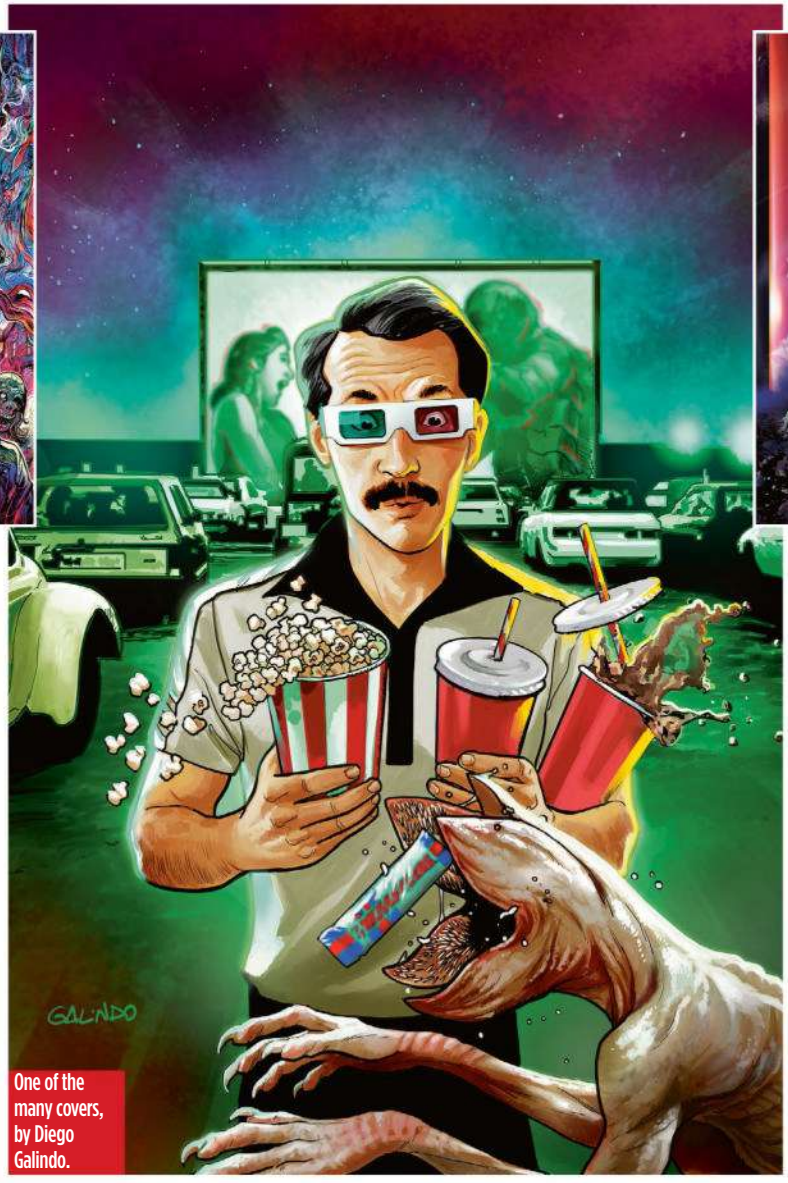
Zdarsky reveals that the opening arc "touches upon his initial meetings with some heroes", and "dances between the raindrops of *Captain America: Man Out Of Time*" – referring to Mark Waid and Jorge Molina's five-parter, which was set in a similar period. "We're definitely making sure the story feels fresh and new and not just referential," says Zdarsky, who sends Cap to Latveria just after Victor Von Doom begins his rule.

"While this first arc is set in the past, it definitely informs the future of Latveria when we come back to the modern era in our second arc," adds Zdarsky. "Also, Doom is so goddamn fun to write!"

Cap dons a new stealth uniform, and also forms an all-new group of Howling Commandos. "I don't want to give too much away, but it's a military mission," teases Zdarsky. "Steve is placed with the new Commandos by his superiors, so he's hoping they live up to their name!"

Captain America is out on 2 July.

SCI-FACT! **Located in Indiana, Hawkins is a composite of many small towns, including Durham, North Carolina, where the Duffer Brothers grew up.**



One of the many covers, by Diego Galindo.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Strange Tales

Welcome to *Stranger Things*' hometown in Dark Horse Comics' **Tales From Hawkins 2**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

ALMOST A character in itself, the Midwest smalltown where *Stranger Things* is set once again takes centre stage in T*ales From Hawkins 2*. Composed of four standalone tales, the miniseries harks back to classic television series such as *The Outer Limits* and *Tales From The Crypt*.

"We also make a playful nod to *The Twilight Zone* in issue one," writer Derek Fridolfs tells Red Alert. "I've always been a fan of anthology stories in comics and TV shows as they provide a nice opportunity to tell some interesting self-contained stories in a shorter episodic format. There's lots of people who make up the community of Hawkins, so we have some room to see them and how they cross paths, along with some of the more familiar characters."

Drawn by Sunando C, issue one focuses on middle school science teacher Scott Clarke, who encounters a mysterious dog – who could be Dustin's missing pet demodog Dart – at Hawkins' outdoor cinema. "I grew up at the tail-end of when drive-ins were still around," recalls Fridolfs.

"We had a few in town, and since one was located next to a freeway near me I have fond memories of driving home on that freeway late at night and always looking over to see what movies were projected onto the screens that were in view. It's such a snapshot of Americana at that time, and something that feels right at home in Hawkins."

Inspired to teach his students how 3D glasses work, Mr Clarke's lesson spills over into some strange alternate worlds. "There are some meta qualities to the movie and horror being shown in our story, but I also wanted to take the opportunity to dig into the science of 3D and other dimensions and that connection to the Upside Down," continues Fridolfs. "What we see in our reality and what we can perceive in others, and who better to experience and teach that than Mr Clarke?

"I always liked his character in the show because he reminded me of some of the cool science teachers I had in school. But now that the later seasons are set in high school we don't get the chance to see him that much any more, so this was also a chance to give him his own spotlight."

Illustrated by Bradley Clayton, Mack Chater and Vincenzo Riccardi respectively, the following issues shine a light on Will Byers, Grigori and the Demogorgon. "Part of the fun of writing something like this is finding all these little pieces of the puzzle, fitting them together and finding new stories or ways to expand on things that were briefly mentioned in the series," explains Fridolfs.

"I wanted to dig a little deeper into Dustin's friendship with Will and how that carries over from season one into season two. We'll also get Grigori's backstory in the Soviet Union, along with his culture shock of coming to America and ending up in Hawkins. And we'll delve into the nature of apex predators in the animal kingdom and what it means when something like the Demogorgon is introduced."

Stranger Things: Tales From Hawkins 2 is out on 25 June.

Newbie Jake Connelly (second right) plays Derek Turnbow.

Lucas prays for Max's recovery.

COUNTDOWN TO STRANGER THINGS 5

Hopper and Eleven strike back.

Netflix have announced the release schedule for the fifth and final season of *Stranger Things*. Revealed as part of Tudum, their annual fan event, broadcast live from Kia Forum in Los Angeles on 31 May, the news came with a first look trailer.

Season five will have a three-part release across November and December. Part one, comprising four episodes, will release globally on 26 November; part two, with three episodes, on 25 December; and part three, the final episode, will follow on 31 December.

All the releases are timed for 5.00pm PT, which means that in Europe they will appear the following day due to time zones. At the moment it appears this means episodes will drop in the UK at 1.00am.

Stars Finn Wolfhard (Mike), Noah Schnapp (Will) and Caleb McLaughlin (Lucas) took to the stage at Tudum, receiving an immediate standing ovation. Together with Millie Bobby Brown (Eleven/Jane Hopper) and Gaten Matarazzo (Dustin), appearing via recorded messages, they looked at the legacy of the series via behind-the-scenes material from the last decade.

The first trailer largely comprises flashbacks, but contains a new sequence of clips at the end. The trailer racked up over five million views in under 12 hours. Both the trailer and Tudum are available on Netflix.

The full official synopsis for season five reads: "The fall of 1987. Hawkins is scarred by the opening of the Rifts, and our heroes are united by a single goal: find and kill Vecna. But he has vanished – his whereabouts and plans unknown. Complicating their mission, the government has placed the town under military quarantine and intensified its hunt for Eleven, forcing her back into hiding. As the anniversary of Will's disappearance approaches, so does a heavy, familiar dread. The final battle is looming – and with it, a darkness more powerful and more deadly than anything they've faced before. To end this nightmare, they'll need everyone – the full party – standing together, one last time."

Roles of newly announced cast members have officially been revealed: Nell Fisher as Holly Wheeler, Jake Connelly as Derek Turnbow, Alex Breaux as Lt Akers and Linda Hamilton as Dr Kay.

Hair designer Sarah Hindsgaul is hosting a podcast with cast and crew members to discuss hairstyles in the series. The first episode was released on 1 June and features Millie Bobby Brown.

Hallmark is releasing a Christmas ornament featuring Sadie Sink as Max levitating. Visit hallmark.com/ornaments.

Stranger Things: The Complete Scripts by The Duffer Brothers will release in four volumes from Penguin Random House. Seasons one and two are due on 2 September, while seasons three and four will be available on 7 October and 4 November respectively.

A *Stranger Things* tie-in with Kinder Eggs and Funko is planned for Europe and the US later this year.

Finn Wolfhard's debut album, *Happy Birthday*, was released on 6 June.

Stranger Things is on Netflix.

COURTESY OF NETFLIX, GETTY

SCI-FACT! **Speaking at Tudum, Noah Schnapp said that he would like to see a Dustin spin-off as that's his favourite character.**

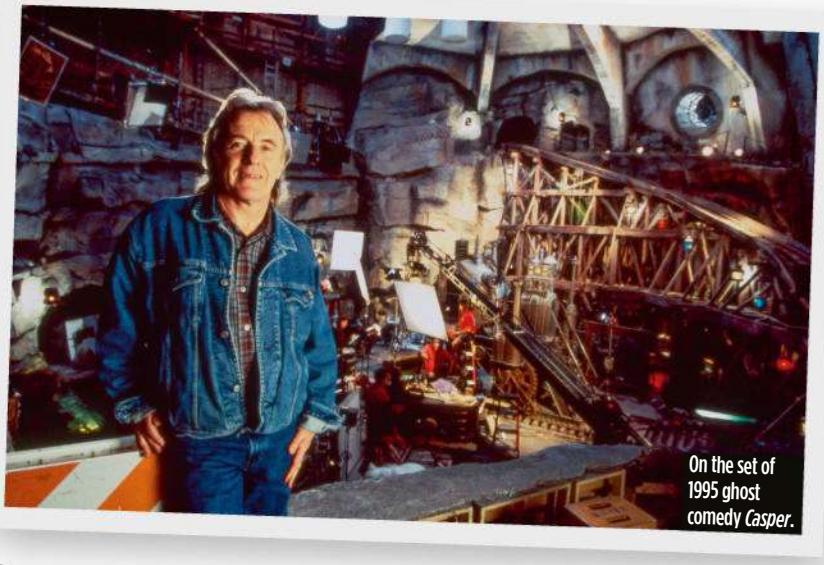
SCI-FACT! **Leslie Dilley helped to push the giant boulder that pursues Harrison Ford in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

LESLIE DILLEY 1941-2025

Remembering the Oscar-winning art director

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**



On the set of 1995 ghost comedy *Casper*.

AS THE ON-SET ART DIRECTOR and production designer for many of fantasy cinema's benchmark movies, Leslie Dilley had the task of making dreams tangible, translating designs into reality.

Born in Pontygwaith in South Wales, he entered the film industry after a five-year plastering apprenticeship at the Associated British Picture Corporation. It was as a plasterer that he worked on 1963's *From Russia With Love* before serving as a draughtsman and then assistant art director on the likes of *Kelly's Heroes* (1970) and Michael Moorcock adaptation *The Final Programme* (1973).

Promoted to art director for the Salkinds' breezy pair of *Musketeers* movies (1973/74), Dilley graduated to cosmic swashbuckling for *Star Wars* (1977), helping to define George Lucas's tarnished, lived-in universe. "There would be a bit of head-scratching going on amongst us as we tried to make sense of it," he remembered of giving physical form to such iconic creations as R2-D2, Luke's landspeeder and the Jawas' towering sandcrawler.

Superman (1978) and *Alien* (1979) followed – the *Nostromo*'s bridge was memorably fashioned from reclaimed scrap, including jet-engine parts and old radios – while *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* (1981) brought Dilley his second Oscar win after the triumph of *Star Wars*, shared again with colleague Norman Reynolds. As with his work on *Alien*, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) saw him Oscar-nominated once more. For 1981's *An American Werewolf In London* he created an exterior for The Slaughtered Lamb – in reality, a cottage in Crickadarn, Wales – that was so convincing passing tourists tried to pop in for a pint.

After credits on *Never Say Never Again* (1983) and *Legend* (1985), Dilley transitioned to production designer. James Cameron's *The Abyss* (1989) found him transforming an abandoned nuclear power plant in South Carolina into a huge underwater set. "That was the most challenging film to work on in my career," he admitted – and it earned him another Oscar nom.

JOE DON BAKER 1936–2025

American actor who appeared in *Edge Of Darkness*, *Mars Attacks!* and three Bond films.

GREG CANNOM 1951–2025

American special make-up effects artist known for *The Lost Boys* and *Bram Stoker's Dracula*.

DAVID JAMES / © UNIVERSAL PICTURES / COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION

NEW AUTHOR

JACKSON P BROWN

MEET THE WRITER BEHIND SUPERNATURAL THRILLER *THE REAPER*

LOLA CAROLINE BAPTISTA

Tell us about your protagonists.
→ Gerald is my take on the Grim Reaper, a supernatural assassin born with a killing curse. He's also polite, soft-natured, and likes a good cup of tea – but has a dark side that he needs to keep in check. Amy is his down-to-earth counterpart: an empath of Jamaican origin, who teaches him how to care about others.

Did the story have a particular spark?
→ I was walking beneath an underpass in London Bridge, when I imagined disappearing down a chute in the ground and escaping to a magical city beneath London. That's where Downstairs was born.

What creatures can be found there?
→ All the usual – witches, warlocks, vampires and werewolves. I've taken some artistic liberty with others: my basilisks are bipedal, human-sized lizards who can control their petrification powers.

How long did it take to write the book?
→ About 15 years. The story was always developing in my head, and sometimes I'd write pieces before moving onto something else! When I finally focused in 2022, it only took a few months. I'd originally planned it to be YA, but as I was in my 30s by then, I aged everyone up and made the plot darker.

Got any advice for budding authors?
→ Don't be afraid to share your work with others. I started a blog years before my book deal and it gave me my first active audience. Knowing other people like what you write will really boost your confidence.

The Reaper is out on 10 July, published by Del Rey.

SUBSCRIBE TODAY
AND SAVE UP TO 52%!*

CHOOSE YOUR SUBSCRIPTION

Print and digital edition

£17.87 EVERY 6 MONTHS

Digital edition

£14.30 EVERY 6 MONTHS

PRINT + DIGITAL ACCESS

NEW! Digital access to 160+ issues when you subscribe to print!**

SUBSCRIBE NOW!

ONLINE magazinesdirect.com/SFX/**DH44H**

PHONE 0330 333 1113 and quote code **DH44H**

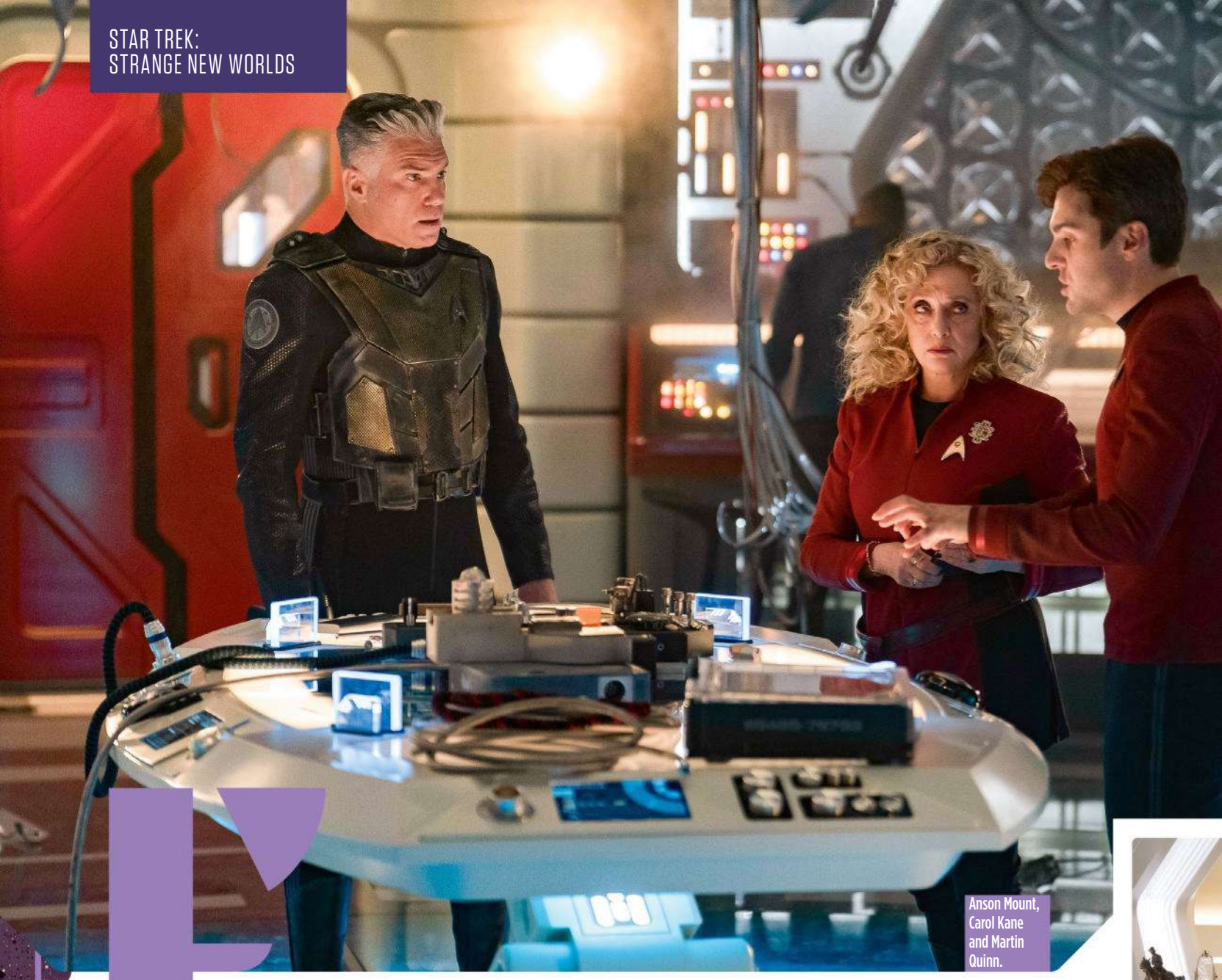
Offer closes 1 September 2025. Price is guaranteed for the first six months, please allow up to six weeks for the delivery of your first subscription issue (up to eight weeks overseas). The subscription rate includes postage and packaging. *Savings are based on the cover price. Payment is non-refundable after the 14-day cancellation period. **Access to the digital library will end with your subscription. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries and overseas rates please call: +44 (0) 330 333 1113. Lines are open Monday-Friday 8:30am-7pm, Saturday 10am-3pm GMT (excluding Bank Holidays) or email help@magazinesdirect.com. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle.

THREE-EN

STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS IS BACK AT LAST, BOLDLY GOING INTO UNCHARTED REALMS OF HUMOUR AND HORROR. "IT'S HARD TO KNOW WHAT WOULD BREAK THE SHOW..."

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

TERPRISE



Anson Mount, Carol Kane and Martin Quinn.

FULL WARP AHEAD! A familiar command on any starship bridge but it could also be a mission statement for *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*.

From an all-singing, all-dancing encounter with a cosmic improbability field to an equally reality-melting crossover with cartoon sister show *Lower Decks*, this 23rd century prequel is unafraid to bend, stretch and, yes, *warp* the very protomatter of the franchise.

"We definitely challenge ourselves to find genres we can use to continue to serve the story and that we haven't used before," says series co-creator Akiva Goldsman. "We're probably not going to do another musical, even though we loved doing the musical.

"We have this cadence of sci-fi action-adventure, which is sort of the metronome, right? Then in between we do other things. The precedent there is *The Original Series*, where you find that [kind of] genre-shifting. We've obviously taken that to heart."

"We usually try and come up with a concept, and the concept can be as big and as crazy as possible," says fellow showrunner Henry Alonso Myers. "Then we check the tyres and spend a lot of time asking 'How do we make this a *Star Trek* episode? How is it about our people? How is it telling a genuine story and giving us an emotional conclusion that actually takes the genre and says something?'"

Clearly the *Strange New Worlds* writers' room generates its very own improbability field. Have they ever had an idea where they've thought no, that's too far, that's going to break the show?

"We've probably done them!" Goldsman laughs. "There have been some we haven't been able to figure out. Every year we've said 'Let's do a Western!' I don't think it would break the show at all, I just don't think we know how to do it.

"We really wanted to do a *TAS* [*The Animated Series*, made by Filmation in the '70s] episode, and for a bunch of reasons we couldn't quite get there. We haven't done a straight animated episode and I don't think we will. Whether it would break the show or not I don't know. Probably not. It's hard to know what would break it.

"First and foremost we try to keep our characters growing. We're allowed to serialise the characterisation even though we're episodic in nature when it comes to narrative. We are secretly 'love stories in space' – not so secret any more. And we like a moral in a story now and then. Cautionary tales, speculative fiction... all the tenets of *Star Trek*, right? So they remain intact. And then the lens is genre."

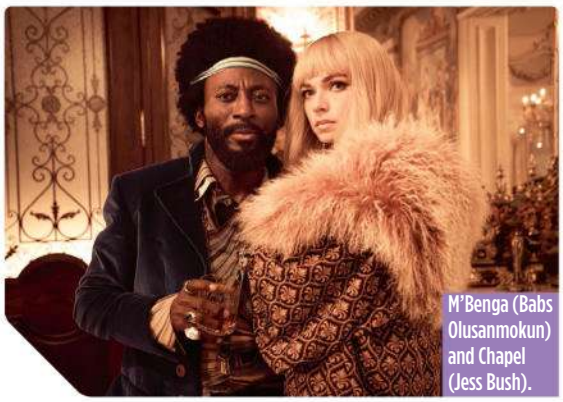
GOT 'TILL IT'S GORN

Beaming back to our screens after two long years – 2023's industry-wide strikes delayed production – the third season promises more high-concept takes on *Trek*, from a '60s-set whodunnit to a faux-documentary. But first there's the small matter of an interplanetary invasion to repel.

Episode one picks up directly from the cliffhanging tease of season two's "Hegemony".

The cast get in some pre-filming booze. (*Joking.*)

Celia Rose Gooding as Uhura and Mynor Luken as Beto.



M'Benga (Babs Olusanmokun) and Chapel (Jess Bush).

Una (Rebecca Romijn) and Pike: interview faces.

Captain Christopher Pike is facing an incursion by the savage, reptilian Gorn, massed at the edge of Federation space. His lover Marie Batel hovers between life and death, her body infested by the creatures' eggs. Colonists from the world below have been taken captive by the enemy even as Starfleet orders an immediate tactical withdrawal. The Enterprise is being strafed by Gorn hunter ships, its shields at a distinctly redshirt-unfriendly 50%.

Pike, as a suitably tight close-up tells us, has a crucial next move to make.

"We knew it would be part two and it would be the conclusion," says Myers of the high-stakes season opener. "We had known that since last season, we just had to wait a long time to let people know. We knew it would be 'And now the conclusion of...'"

There's an unmistakable echo of "The Best Of Both Worlds", the explosive, audience-baiting two-parter that bridged the third and fourth seasons of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Famously, Michael Piller wrote that Borg-defying cliffhanger with no idea how he was going to resolve it. Did the *Strange New Worlds* writing team find themselves in the same situation?

"Some of the things we absolutely knew and then there were a few things that kind of developed over time," Myers tells *SFX*. "There were some things that Akiva and the room came up with that were interesting, like, 'Oh, what if we try this, because this will give us more for the coming season...'

"We always knew our people would survive. I think the fun of it for the audience is always 'How will they survive? And what are the emotional stakes that come out of it?'

"We lose [Chief Engineer] Hemmer in season one to the Gorn, and then we basically put the love of Captain Pike's life up against that very same thing. We knew we had to find a way through that. That was the emotional thing that was delightful from the writing perspective. It just makes it dramatic and interesting and fun and made you want to cry."

The second episode of the new season jumps three months from the Gorn confrontation – and trades the blood and adrenaline of interstellar war for something altogether more playful.

"Obviously episode two, as is often the case in our seasons, is a kind of reset," shares Goldsman. "Those who have lived have lived, and off we go, and the new cast is getting established. So now how do we find ourselves in a new circumstance? In a weird way, romantic comedy became an interesting way of doing that."

The episode sees actor and comedian Rhys Darby pop up as someone who might – just might – have a fan-tickling connection to classic *Star Trek*.

"I think it's clear that [Gene] Roddenberry had a fascination with this kind of character," Goldsman hints. "In a weird way he created him a couple of times. So far be it from us not to sign up for that ride!"

"One of the most fun things about the show is having them deal with someone like that," agrees Myers. "He crosses the line between science and what is fantasy, essentially, and forces us to look at our world in a different way. He's a really fun character and I think that was the real win for us. This character's fun; let's try to find a way to make him as fun as we possibly can and use him to reflect things about our people's own emotions."

> **"Those who have lived have lived, and off we go, and the new cast is getting established"**

Goldsman smiles. "We're definitely reaching into the canon. God knows we cause enough trouble with canon, so we're also trying to clean up some things too!"

The episode also sees the arrival of a new recurring character. Cillian O'Sullivan boards the Enterprise as Dr Roger Korby, an expert in archaeological medicine who provides a new romantic interest for Christine Chapel (yes, Spock's blood turns an even more vivid shade of green). Korby appeared in *The Original Series*, played by Michael Strong in season one episode "What Are Little Girls Made Of?"

"You sort of have to figure out what his past is and how he connects to people and how those relationships affect and change the people who we see every week," says Myers of a character previously presented as an antagonist, one whose consciousness was encased in an android body. "A lot of this was about us trying to approach Chapel from the →

STOCK IMAGES: GEENGRAPHY, CLAUDIOVENTRELLA/GETTY

Things look a little gloomy on this away mission.

Spock (Ethan Peck) in a Holodeck mystery.

Time to tie up some loose ends in episode one.

perspective of 'Let's deepen and imagine the conversation she would go through. Let's imagine what she went through to land with this person.

"People who watch the show know where he's going to go, but that's not who he is today. None of us thinks Chapel is an idiot and makes a terrible choice. So let's actually see how she came to like this guy. Let's see how he's interesting and let's see how he can affect our story."

MONSTERS IN THE DARK

Episode four uses a prototype holodeck to raid the dressing-up box, placing security chief La'An in a 1960s murder mystery that winks at the real life origins of *Star Trek* itself.

"Holodeck episodes are so much a sub-genre in *Star Trek*," says Goldsman. "*The Animated Series* creates a precedent for the use of this immersive technology in the era of *TOS*. So anytime we can find licence to do a thing... It's fun for an audience of veterans and novices don't mind. They're like, 'Oh, it's a make-believe story in space.' It's fun to find another way to let people do different things."

As Myers tells *SFX*, it's an episode that's not afraid to celebrate the candy-coloured aesthetic and occasionally cheeseball trappings of vintage sci-fi. "We try very hard to make every episode an interesting treat for our actors. We try to give them something new and different to do. The more you do that, the more they come ready to play. So part of that was 'Let's really lean into the fun of the '60s look."

"I think we edge right up to parody," shares Goldsman. "If we had done that as a whole episode, which we considered, that wouldn't have worked."

Myers nods. "You can probably get to about 30 minutes with a lot of jokes but then at some point you have to say, 'What's it really about? How can we make it about the fact that *Star Trek* was a show that came out of this crucial time?'"

Your tricorders may be detecting strong signs of whimsy but this season of *Strange New Worlds* also leans into the darker side of *Star Trek*. From the bio-horrors of the Gorn to undead Klingons to possessed crewmembers, their eyes scorched from their sockets by malevolent entities, there are episodes that summon the ancient chill of the stars, powerful reminders that the final frontier can be a terrifying place to be.

"I'm very much a 'space is scary' guy!" Goldsman grins. "I think it's part of what's really cool about it. It's mysterious, there's edge. There's a Gregory Benford novel that has this wonderful notion of 'Why are we reaching for the stars? It's the colourful flowers that get eaten'... There's something really interesting about that sometimes.

"We keep playing around with some Cthulhuesque thing happening, behind the walls of the universe. I think I'm always looking for the thing that's going to come get you in the dark."

"Can we find something worse than the Gorn?" adds Myers, of the search for the ideal cosmic bogeyman. "Can we find something that makes the universe feel a little different? The Gorn is our version of a classic creature that comes from the original series. What if we throw something out that you haven't seen?"

"Horror and science fiction go very nicely together," says Goldsman. "The supernatural and science fiction go very nicely together. Fantasy and science fiction go very nicely together. We like to dip into those wells."

With the end of *Star Trek: Discovery* after five seasons, *Strange New Worlds* is now the flagship show of the franchise. Has that changed their approach to the series?

"Not at all," says Myers, without hesitation.

"Henry and I are *Star Trek* fans," says Goldsman, simply. "There are so many different ideas about what *Star Trek* is, which is kind of

MARNI GROSSMAN/PARAMOUNT+

Scotty played by an actual Scot? It's PC gone mad!

what's amazing. We're really very much going, 'Do we find this delightful?' We're not indulging ourselves. We keep all the guard rails in place. But we're looking to find – as is our room – stories that we find appealing that feel like *Star Trek* to us. That seems to echo out to a significant enough portion of the *Star Trek* audience that they let us keep doing it.

"You know, there's great *Star Trek* that won't come out of our show. Our show will very rarely resemble *DS9*. *DS9* is great *Star Trek*. We're the variety show people. We're the people who liked *TOS* and just thought 'A Piece Of The Action' was really cool and could exist perfectly alongside 'The City On The Edge Of Forever'. So that's what we did."

Given the show's popularity you'd imagine a movie version might be the logical way to bring *Trek* back to the big screen.

"Look, it's up to Paramount and [Skydance Media supremo] David Ellison, God bless them," says Goldsman. "For me, and I've spent most of my career mainly in features, it's better as TV. Part of what's nice about this is that we're having a conversation about [all these] episodes. You get this sort of shape that comes from the shifting of genre. If you did that in a movie, unless you were as brilliant as brilliant could be, that genre-shift is going to really, really piss an audience off. So I'd just like us to keep going, infinitely. That won't happen but by the way, if someone wants to throw movie money at us, we're not going to argue, are we, Henry?"

"No!" agrees Myers. "I think that would be a story about Captain Pike. That's what everyone would want. The fun of doing a TV show is you get to lean into everybody. That's the thing I would miss. I mean, I love movies, but that is the thing I would miss that you get from television."

Indeed, "We're just going to keep making them until they stop us," Goldsman tells *SFX*. "We will boldly go until they tell us to boldly sit down." ●

Star Trek: Strange New Worlds is on Paramount+ from 17 July.

SCOTTY THE BRAVE

The engines canon take it!

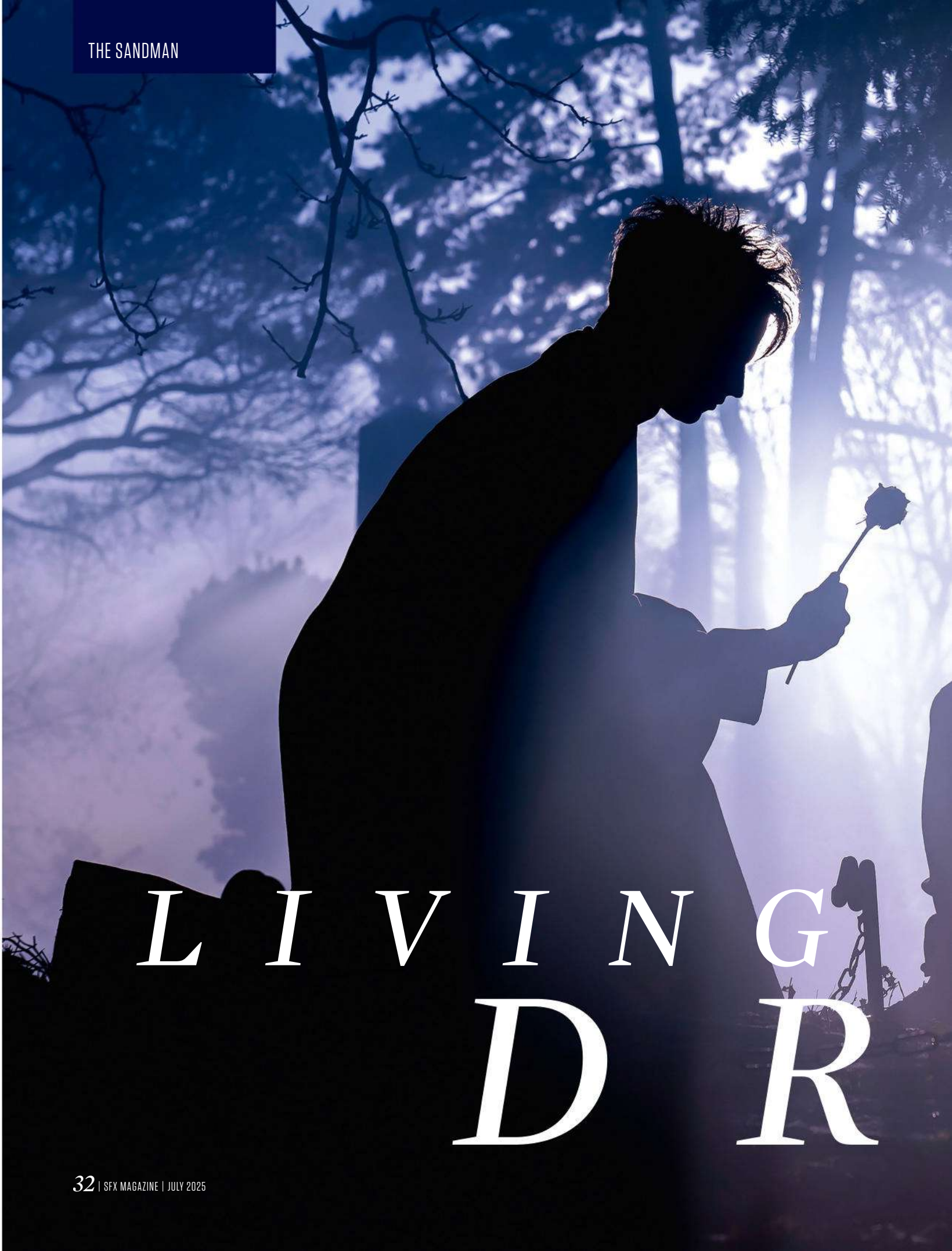
Season three sees another iconic character become a series regular: Montgomery Scott, trusty sorcerer of the Enterprise engine room, played by Paisley-born Martin Quinn.

"Like with most of them, a lot of the approach was don't do the character that you already know," says Henry Alonso Myers. "Let's learn about who they were beforehand. He is not the head of engineering yet. He is not any of those people [we've seen]. He is a person who is going through his own thing. Sometimes he's funny, sometimes he's emotional. And also let's try to cast someone who is genuinely Scottish and can have that energy.

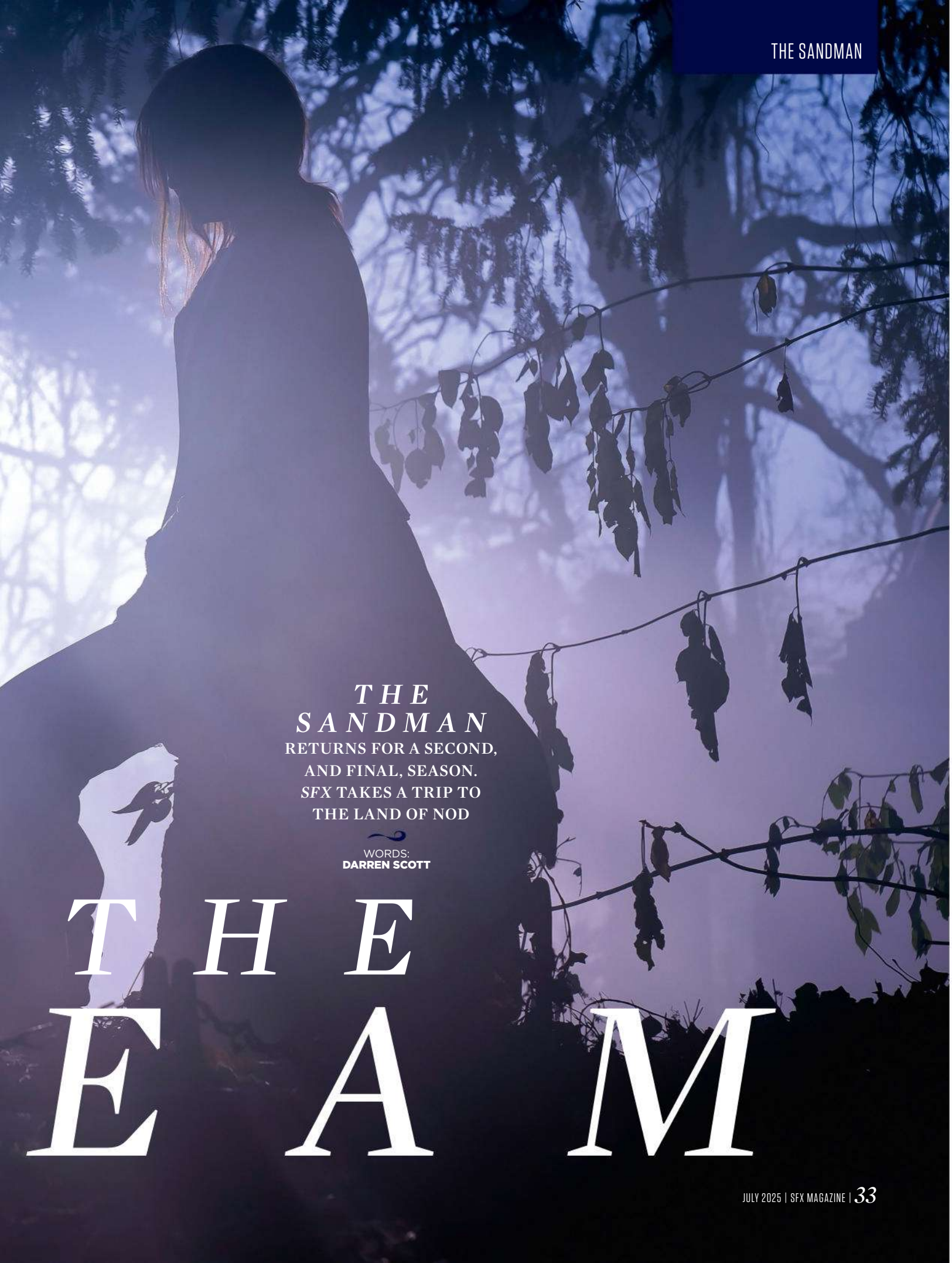
"Scotty's such a fun character, so how can we fit him into the dynamic? A lot of it was about how do we give him an emotional story, which is something they even did on *Next Gen*, in that classic episode where they find him hidden in the transporter ["Relics"].

"What can we do with this character? How does he change things? How does he make the story different? How can we surprise people?"

"We have an opportunity to layer these characters in ways they might not have had the screen time to be layered," adds Akiva Goldsman. "The fact we can shift around and give equal time to the characters forces us in the best possible way to say, 'Who might they have been before they are who we met?'"



LIVING DR



THE EAM

THE SANDMAN **RETURNS FOR A SECOND, AND FINAL, SEASON. *SFX* TAKES A TRIP TO THE LAND OF NOD**

WORDS:
DARREN SCOTT

SFX HAS ARRIVED AT HELL. It's probably not the first time in our 30-year history – and likely won't be the last – but thankfully this trip is temporary and actually housed within Shepperton Studios in London.

It's February 2024 and we've been invited to a banquet – but this isn't any ordinary meal, this is a gathering of representatives from several different realms, all of whom are vying for ownership of Hell once Lucifer abdicates. We'll just graze, thanks.

This is season two of *The Sandman*, which returns to Netflix in July for 12 episodes, including a standalone outing for Death. It's also the final season, as Dream's story is wrapped up in a slightly different way.

"We're remixing a lot of it," showrunner and writer Allan Heinberg tells *SFX*. "There are a lot of standalone stories because we're an ongoing series; it's all focused on Dream's character primarily. So we will weave in and out of flashbacks that allow us to get to know the characters.

"All of the self-contained moments are incorporated into the narrative as flashbacks. For example, 'The Song Of Orpheus', which is a standalone Sandman special, that's all now a flashback in episode five rather than its own episode. Thermidor, which we've included – a flashback to the French Revolution with Joanna Constantine – is an example of that.

"Since we're moving forward with Dream's life, anytime we look backward, it's as a flashback in order to give the present some context and meaning."

SPLIT SCREEN

Today's entertainment – for both us and the representatives of the realms in the banquet hall – is a magic show performed by Cain and Abel with sidekick Goldie the Gargoyle. As you might expect, the box-sawing trick doesn't exactly go in Abel's favour.

"They're just deciding how to chop people in half..." production tells us. Jamie Childs – who's directing all 12 episodes of the season – is on stage figuring it out.

The set smells of wood and smoke. There are extras in woolly robes who will later mingle with "representatives from Faerie, the demons from Hell, the Lords of Order, the Lords of Chaos, Shivering Jemmy, and the Chaos Brigade, Lord Susano-o-no-Mikoto, who's a Japanese storm god, and the Norse gods Oden, Thor and Loki," Heinberg explains.

The representatives all have different themed tables. The demons' table is covered in entrails. There's cling film keeping the eyeballs, hearts and livers "fresh". The Norse gods have a lot of meat – over-sized turkeys on sticks so they look like giant legs. Another table has sweets, dolls and a Victorian creepiness, using the attic from *The Woman In Black* as a reference. Susano's table has a bonsai tree and a sand garden – the sand is all modelled and fixed so that it can't be moved.

> **"We will weave in and out of flashbacks that allow us to get to know the characters"**

The season prioritises real sets over CG creations.

Tom Sturridge as Dream.

Vivienne Acheampong returns as Lucienne.

JUST

Tom Sturridge is Dream

Do you feel like you have a deeper understanding of your character now in season two?

You can't help but have a deeper understanding after you've spent a year doing something, rather than when you're a total virgin to the experience. Having time away from it was also incredibly helpful. There's something about time breeds subconscious experience, which, ironically, is what our entire show is about, and that's been very helpful with Dream.

But more than me personally, it's such a communal experience, the making of something like this. What's most thrilling is everyone together having an understanding of what they're doing, because at the beginning, you have actors who can be obsessive about characters, but members of the crew don't necessarily have a historic understanding of *The Sandman*. Suddenly now we all know what we're in. So the thing that we're building together is

Dream is having to re-evaluate how his actions have affected those around him.

ANOTHER DREAM

instinctive as a group and that is an incredibly unusual and magical thing to witness.

This season doesn't follow the comics in a linear sense...
It's difficult to talk about. It does and it doesn't. The comics obviously don't follow a linear story either. That's what makes them so incredibly satisfying. That's why it's taken so long to adapt them, because long-form television is the only form that can deviate from a linear narrative. You can't do that in two hours. If it isn't linear, then it's because it's faithful to what the comics did.

When you do a first season of anything, there's a lot of world building to achieve and a lot of introductions. What's thrilling about this year is that is done now and we can dump you into the story and feel confident in who we are and people recognising the world that they're in.

Was it easy to get back into the character?
It was exciting. It was thrilling to get back into it. I hesitate to say easy, but only because I'm not really sure how to quantify the experience. What I do want to say is that the thing that's *spectacularly* different to the first season is that we have one director, Jamie Childs, directing every single episode, which is an incredibly rare way of making television. They did it with season one of *True Detective*. I can't think of many directors who've done 12 episodes of something. What that means is it's like making a film. It's a completely holistic experience.

You don't have that thing of having to reintroduce people every six weeks to what you're trying to do. That is what is going to make the biggest difference is that there's one vision telling the story. What has been particularly exciting doing the second season is going deeper, much, much deeper into his soul, as opposed to simply trying to lay the foundations of his history.

Does it change the process, working on a physical set?
A hundred per cent. The way the industry is evolving, you have everything in these productions from LED screens to just plain blue screen. The thing that I am so conscious of in my relationship with my own dreams, which I think people often forget, is how extraordinarily real they are and how almost all the time I don't know that I'm dreaming. What's incredibly, exquisitely important is to do justice to that experience.

So for everything within the show to be tangible and to be able to see it and touch it and smell it and feel it – credit to Netflix and the production team, they've committed to that. They've been building these extraordinary sets. In something that is so based on one's imagination, it's amazing not to have to use it that much. When they're framing the cameras, they're looking at the frames in the comics, seeing if there are things that are iconic that need to be realised and reflected. This is a *Sandman* made by *Sandman* fans. Therefore, it is immersive.

Dream with new character Delirium (Esme Creed-Miles).

Do you have much involvement with your costumes?
Sarah Arthur, our costume designer, is a brilliant woman, and I would say has almost all the involvement. But I know the character well. I care about it a lot. I constantly want to be true to the comics more than anything else. But then there's an aesthetic that I understand, that is historically related to certain musicians and performers. When it was written, the 1980s was the contemporary time, and now we're in the 2020s. So you have to find an avenue that makes sense.

The combination of the historical sweep of the story and its dreamlike element allows for *such* creative opportunity and the sartorial aspect of it. The idea of what would the King of Dreams be wearing in 17th-century England? That's a thrilling question, I imagine, as a costume designer to be able to pose to yourself and one that I think has been answered quite spectacularly.

What from season two are you especially looking forward to?
Having all of the Endless in one room together for the first time would be thrilling. It's yet to happen. Interrogating this history of that family, be it Dream's relationships, his loves, his children. Beyond anything, *The Sandman* is a story about a family and with all families; it's funny, frightening, and deeply, deeply sad. It's exciting to explore that.

"Well, I suppose the invite *did* said 'bring a friend'..."

Esme Creed-Miles on set as Delirium.

(From left) Desire (Mason Alexander Park), Death (Kirby Howell-Baptiste), Dream (Tom Sturridge), Destruction (Barry Sloane), Despair (Donna Preston), Destiny (Adrian Lester) and Delirium (Esme Creed-Miles).

"Dream realises he's created all kinds of trouble for people he allegedly cares about"

Someone holds a model of Goldie in shot for scene 202/41, take two.

"Jiggle, drop, separate!" someone shouts. The box splits and entrails fall on the floor to groans all around. The Goldie prop is then positioned beside Abel's spilled innards. "Who's on clean-up?" someone jokes.

It's then that Dream, aka Tom Sturridge, glides along the banquet hall and sits at a table. "I swear to God, he just floats across the set," actor Douglas Booth tells us. "I don't know how he does it. I feel like he maybe has those wheels on the bottom of his shoes."

A hush falls across Studio A. Dream takes to the stage. As he does so, a spotlight hits him.

"Good guests," he says. "That concludes the evening's entertainment. I suggest you leave this room at this time. It will cease to exist shortly. Good night."

They try another take where he doesn't pause between sentences. "That concludes..." Someone pulls the curtains on him and the crew laughs.

"As for the matter that has brought you here... Oh fuck, sorry!" Sturridge exits the stage before returning to deliver the lines again, but with more dramatic pauses.

Another take and the curtain hits a candelabra. It spins slightly but doesn't affect filming. Another take and more smoke is pumped in. Another take, missing the candelabra. The curtains open and close, open and close...

FAN SERVICE

"It's more of the same in terms of taking an arrogant, honourable, all-seeing, all-knowing deity and humanising him and teaching him – or watching him figure out what it means to be a good sibling, a good husband, a good father. Teaching him – we're trying to teach him – compassion," Heinberg tells us of what to expect in season two.

"You get to know Dream and his intimate relationships a lot more deeply, especially the family relationships with his brother and sister. He starts to make choices that are emotionally responsible. This is somebody who, when we started out in season one, thought that he was the most important being in the universe with the most important job. It's taken him a minute to realise that other people have other points of view and that his behaviour, though he thought it was honourable in the moment, has created all kinds of trouble for people he allegedly cares about.

"Last season was about realising he made mistakes, and this season is about trying to make things right and the cost of that, to the point where if it becomes too dangerous, do you protect yourself or do you protect the →

GODS AND MONSTERS

Freddie Fox and Douglas Booth are Loki and Cluracan

DB I'm playing Cluracan. I'm from Faerie, and I'm in the court of Queen Titania and Auberon, and my sister is Nuala. There is in the series – it's quite a famous part of the comic – the *A Midsummer Night's Dream* sequence. That's where Dream tried to heal the relationship between the dream world and the Faerie world, as it were. We see it more in the form of flashback in our show. But basically, my sister has a bit of a soft spot for Dream. Dream is given the keys to Hell by Lucifer. The first couple of episodes is this great coming together of the Faerie world, the Norse gods – you've got the envoys from the Kilderkin, Lords of Chaos and Order. A lot to keep track of! Everyone comes together and it's this great thing of Dream having to weigh up who should have the gates to Hell.

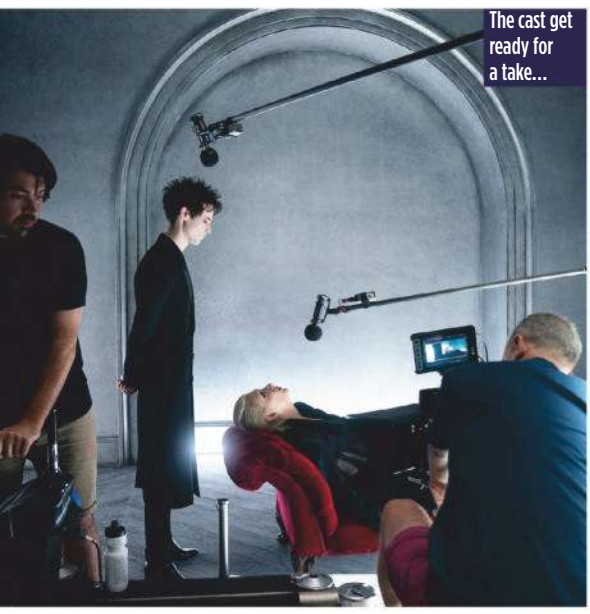
Nuala and myself, Cluracan, come to the Dreaming to try and convince Dream that he should give it to none of them because Faerie has a tie to Hell, which means that they have to give seven of their most beautiful and brightest every seven years. That's the surface-level plot, and then you get into the personal character and stories.

But my character – because Cluracan means a leprechaun that haunts breweries and pubs – is always drunk and trying to sleep with everyone. I have a fun relationship with my sister, who is trying to do the right thing, trying to really impress Dream, fulfil her diplomatic mission, whereas I just want to get drunk.

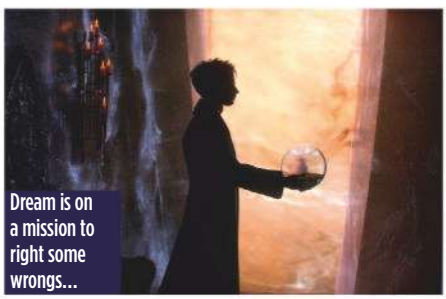
FF Loki is the god of mischief. He's got all sorts of monikers: Wolf Father, Cloud Walker, all of those things. In mythology, he's an extraordinary composite of so many things. When he says Wolf Father, he actually gives birth to a wolf, so he's actually really a Wolf Mother. Anyway, he's known as this shapeshifting, chameleonic, mischievous, dangerous, very sexually curious sprite. More than a sprite. Sprite sounds inert and innocent. He's not.

What he wants to do is to show the human realm the hypocrisy of their lives and introduce a bit of anarchy into the system because that's essentially what humanity is, a hodgepodge of complete nuts-ness and trying to pretend that it's not. He's like, "Come on, you're not."

There's a bit of the Joker in *Batman* about him. That's his overriding mission which goes on a journey with Puck from his realm. Puck and he have a relationship, a long-standing, I guess, romantic relationship, but it's a bit dyed-in-the-wool now. They're a bit like a bickering old couple who go off and do their own thing. But their main mission together is to steal Daniel, the baby, and burn him alive. He's a nice guy, really [laughs]. It's really trying to hold the mirror up to humanity and go, "Look at yourselves, you're ridiculous," and, in the end, have a good time doing it. That's his MO.



The cast get ready for a take...



Dream is on a mission to right some wrongs...

The show's trademark spectacle is still in place.

FAMILY TIES

Sanjeev Bhaskar and Asim Chaudhry are Cain and Abel

Do you feel you know your characters better now?
SB The characters are pretty clear on the page of the comic books. What you don't know, what you can't see, is the relationship. One of the things with us being able to hang out with each other is that you find that. You find that tonal thing, which isn't necessarily on the page.
AC You find that dynamic. On paper, it's like, "Oh, Cain and Abel. It's a biblical story. Cain murders Abel." But actually, there's a lot of complexities about the brotherly relationship and about greed and envy. But it definitely feels more familiar coming back for the second season and just figuring out the nuances more than just him murdering me every episode.

Is Abel still the reluctant stooge?
AC Yeah, I think he is. There is still comedy in that, that violence with Cain and Abel. We did this scene today and yesterday – it's funny. It's the magic [saw] trick and Abel thinks, "Oh, but there's a trap door. Just get in the box." I do think he still is that innocent. There was this great scene that we did in the first season, and I'm climbing out of a grave and I'm talking to Goldie and I'm saying, "Cain doesn't mean to murder me. It's just the way he is." There's actually parallels of an abusive relationship where the person thinks it's their fault.
SB We shot another scene where you see that nuance of fleeting warmth from Cain towards Abel. That's the thing that you can only find in person, really, because you're working off of each other. It's very difficult to just plan that beforehand and go, "Well, I'll give a little warm look at that point." In your head it doesn't work, but in situ it enables you to find it.

Are they looking forward to performing at the banquet?
SB Cain has been given centre stage on this so I think he's relishing it. Otherwise, in the comic books and in the first series, they stay in their realm, in their House of Mystery and House of Secrets. For them to suddenly interact with this broader world, I think it's a big thing for them. Abel looks forward to everything.
AC Well, he does. But also we are immortal. So even though Cain is killing me and my guts are spilling, we will be back. So that's the great thing about these characters. So as long as Sandman goes, we can't be cut. We can't die.

What's it like working with Goldie?
AC Goldie always steals everything, every time. We're screwed with that.
SB He's too cute. In fact, I'm also the Chancellor of the University of Sussex, and so I hand out the degrees twice a year. The winter graduation was last month. At least three people of the 2,000 people that crossed the stage, as they shook hands or gave me a hug, said, "That's for Goldie."
AC Like I said, Goldie just fucking steals it. Little prick.

Dream encounters Umulisa Gahiga's queen Nada.

"How long do I have to hold this pose just for one photo?"

> "It all becomes one story, regardless of whether you're in the past or in the future"

people that you love? I think it's a much more personal and intimate and emotional season than last season was."

He adds they never solely use scope and spectacle in order to tell the story. "Jamie Childs, our director, doesn't like to rely on CGI. He doesn't like to rely on the SFX or VFX at all. It feels better to him if everything's in camera and if everything is practical. That really helps keep us focused on the emotional lives of the characters and what's going on in the scene.

"The demands of the show are ridiculous – beyond ridiculous – and somehow they make it all look gorgeous and easy, and nobody asks, 'Why are we suddenly in an Elizabethan tent performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* while there's a demon banquet going on down the hall?' Everybody just goes with it, and it all looks really beautiful. It's because we're focused on this emotional storyline that I think it all becomes one story, regardless of whether you're in the past or in the future or wherever."

Sanjeev Bhaskar as Cain and Cassie Clare as Mazikeen.

"Weather's changeable again, innit?"

Adrian Lester joins the cast as Destiny.

Gwendoline Christie is back as Lucifer Morningstar, the ruler of Hell.

Puck (Jack Gleeson) and Loki (Freddie Fox) go for the papal look.

But it's memorable sequences such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that fans have come to almost demand of the production.

"We try to preserve as many of the comic-book moments as possible and translate them in a way that feels like we're fulfilling fan fantasies of what that would look like on film," Heinberg explains.

"But also the show dictates what works and what doesn't and what's moving the story forward for Dream at all times. There have been plenty of times where I've actually tried to include too much from the comics: we film it, and you see it in the context of the cut and of the story, and you realise, 'Yeah, nobody's going to understand this.'

"So there have been casualties already. But again, it's bonus content for the website, and also the fans will *love* it because they can't say we didn't try!"

The Sandman is on Netflix from 3 July.

THE WORLD OF SANDMAN

Observations from the set

Dream's private quarters are sparse, but huge. "It's not homely. It's somewhere he just comes. It's a bit Zen, and it's got that traditional feel to it, but elegant, very stylised," we're told by the production team.

The library from season one was filmed in Lincoln's Inn Fields – this time it was built. They "kept the essence of it", we're told, with a table brought over from France in a van. "I thought it was a beautiful thing for Lucienne to be sitting at." There are buckets everywhere because when Dream's in a really foul mood it rains.

The show goes through many different time periods, particularly Ancient Greece – meaning that a lot of the set pieces dotted throughout the season are from Ancient Greece. "That's the joy of *The Sandman*. Last week it was the French Revolution. Then the next week, we're in Elizabeth I's throne room that just happens to have an IBM computer in it. It's a juxtaposition every week."

Dream's throne is *very* high. So high, in fact, that there's actual bird poop on the 16th step (of 24, fact fans).

In Lyta Hall's apartment we spot a copy of *Dune* and a book about latex fashion photography.

What's Dream's bedside book? ("It was black and French and I liked it," says the designer.) *My Priest Among The Poor* (1925) by Clément Vautel.

PLAY TIME IS OVER

TIME'S UP AS THE CAST AND CREATOR OF **SQUID GAME** REFLECT ON THE FINAL SEASON OF A GLOBAL JUGGERNAUT

WORDS: ADAM DAVIDSON

456

Returning stars Jo Yuri, Lee Jung-jae and Park Sung-hoon.

POILER-PHOBES, LOOK AWAY! *SQUID Game*'s season-two finale shocked audiences with a bloody and dramatic cliffhanger, as Gi-hun's failed rebellion ended in disaster. The protagonist – portrayed by Lee Jung-jae – was secretly betrayed by the Front Man and his best friend was murdered as a result of his actions.

These tragic events have left Gi-hun with an overwhelming feeling of guilt and remorse which he must overcome to prevail against evil, says the man behind him.

"The finale of season two was the most traumatic moment for Gi-hun. His friend Jung-bae died in front of him and the whole reason was because he planned this coup," Lee says. "Gi-hun feels like he has lost everything that he had now that his friend has gone, and he feels this huge amount of guilt and remorse.

"I was very curious, as an actor, what [Gi-hun] will do in season three, what choices will he make. As I was filming, I was very focused on what feelings he was going through and, after Jung-bae, how was he going to overcome this big traumatic moment and further explode and explore his emotions."

The answer? The audience will see a new side of Gi-hun – no longer will he hold the answer to everything the game throws at him; now he is left powerless and broken.

"Gi-hun is overwhelmed with a profound sense of defeat and remorse. He feels completely powerless as if he wants to give up on everything," says writer and director Hwang Dong-hyuk. "Gi-hun projects the remorse and guilt bottled up inside him in a way he can't control – and it gets redirected onto someone else..."

Expect Lee Jung-jae to deliver a memorable performance in season three, as Gi-hun is a broken man after the failed rebellion.

"Gi-hun reaches his lowest and darkest point; he barely speaks in most scenes," Hwang says. "He teeters on the edge of madness and becomes self-destructive. Jung-jae got Gi-hun's profound character arc across with minimal dialogue, as his gestures and gaze spoke volumes."

Season three brings tragedy to the arena.

FRONT-LOADED

Gi-hun took home 45.6 billion South Korean won after triumphing in the Squid Games, but became obsessed with taking down the people who caused his pain and suffering. He returned to the games and vowed to put an end to them, but Front Man stood in his way.

When Lee Byung-hun was approached for the role of Front Man in season one, his character was originally only a small part of the overall story, as *Squid Game* was intended as a limited series. Compelled to develop the story further, Hwang and his actor crafted a backstory for the villain as the importance of his character grew.

Lee Byung-hun asserts that Hwang is a "genius", as he was able to craft a "very dramatic and perfectly constructed story" under such pressure in a short amount of time.

Nevertheless, there was still one big issue that Lee Byung-hun faced when portraying both Front Man and Player 001, as he was unsure what balance to strike with the tone of the two versions of his character. "He takes on the disguise as a player but he is such a pessimistic character and the epitome of darkness. How can he disguise himself as a normal person so that everyone would buy in and think of him as this new guy?" Lee Byung-hun asks. "How can he act out the joy, nervousness and fear that any other player would have whilst he's not feeling it?"

> "Gi-hun reaches his lowest and darkest point. He teeters on the edge of madness"

This uncertainty about the best way to portray Player 001 led to a collaborative process with Hwang, as they experimented with tones and different approaches to make the deceptive actions of Front Man more sinister. "When I had to play this fake character as a player, at first I thought I would express little because he is still Front Man inside, and after going through all those traumatic events he won't be able to express his feelings like a normal person would," Lee Byung-hun says.

Wi Ha-joon as former police detective Hwang Jun-ho.

Front Man (Lee Byung-hun) has questioned his mission.

"But then director Hwang suggested trying to be more expressive, because he was also not certain what balance to strike but he said to try this and compare.

"I tried to be more expressive, as if I am really feeling the joy, tension and nervousness with my team. When we tried that and saw it on the monitor, he actually looked stranger and more eerie."

Even though Front Man is in disguise as Player 001 throughout season two, there are moments where he seemingly shows compassion for others – such as pregnant contestant Jun-hee, played by Jo Yuri. His empathy blurs the lines between what is acting and deception and his true feelings, posing the question of whether there's a good side to the villain after all.

"Before everything happened and he was just Hwang In-ho, he was probably like any one of us: he would have some good and some evil inside of him," Lee Byung-hun suggests. "But when he's in disguise as Player 001, he probably found some of his past self whilst playing the games. I believe that maybe he might have recovered some of the good in him while being this player in the game.

"Front Man wants to prove Gi-hun wrong →

GAME PLAY

How a Korean drama changed the world

When *Squid Game* premiered in 2021, it captured the imagination of a global audience in a way that very few programmes had done before. The record-breaking show became Netflix's most-watched series of all time by attracting 142 million member households, and has picked up six Emmys and one Golden Globe.

It's by no means the first Korean show or movie to reach a mass global audience, as Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* had recently won the Academy Award for Best Picture and Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* and *The Handmaiden* were influential on Western cinema and achieved incredible success.

However, the unprecedented profile of the series has helped bring a whole new audience to K-dramas with the help of streaming services.

"Before, everyone wanted to go to Hollywood because it's the biggest entertainment industry," says Front Man actor Lee Byung-hun. "But now that we have streamers like Netflix, if there's a creative and great story, it can be created anywhere and anyone can enjoy it on the other side of the world. Streamers have truly become the game-changer of this industry. The success of *Squid Game* has boosted the confidence of Korean directors and writers – they wouldn't have necessarily changed the way that they work but it gave them motivation and a boost."

Park Gyu-young, who plays No-eul, echoes this sentiment, having seen first-hand how the impact of *Squid Game* has helped revitalise the Korean film and TV industry. "*Squid Game* was a big project where a large group of people got together under such meticulous planning and so much effort went into the project [which] became really successful and popular," she says. "That consequently brought bigger energy and enthusiasm into the industry. As an actor, it was such a blessing, and I feel like it opened up new doors to new content which has become more accessible and approachable."

Geum-ja offers some maternal guidance.

Has Jun-hee (Jo Yuri) chosen wisely?

Kang Ha-neul returns as Gi-hun's ally Dae-ho.

Yim Si-wan as contestant Myung-gi.

that if he tries the games again then he will become the pessimistic soul that I am. But another part of him wants to cheer for him and root for him, and hope he is right that we have not lost all hope in humanity. It's very complex, and he has that duality inside of him."

GUERILLA TACTICS

Front Man had the opportunity to kill Gi-hun at the end of season two, but he's playing a game of psychological warfare with the protagonist. Hwang explains, "He's trying to tear down all his beliefs about being able to change the world."

Gi-hun is pushed to his limits, and it seems as though the darkness will consume him as his humanity slips away. However, things start to change during a transformative scene in episode three of season three, as Geum-ja – who joins the games to pay off her son's gambling debt – has a moving conversation with Gi-hun that has a profound effect on him.

"Even though [Geum-ja's] circumstances are not looking pretty good, she is still looking after other people and caring for other people," says Lee Jung-jae. "The willingness to help is something that really awakened Gi-hun, because he also came into this game once again just because he wanted to help people to get out of the game space. After having the conversation with the mother character, Gi-hun feels that people have to help each other out and that's the only way out of this game.

"Gi-hun has been trying his best, but all of his attempts have been failing and he was constantly put to the test. He had this overwhelming feeling of defeat, but because the mother character told him that is why we exist and why we have to help each other. He finally realises that is the reason he is here and this is what really awakens him and gives him courage."

Another new member for season two was Park Gyu-young as No-eul, a North Korean defector who had to leave her child across the border. The audience are led to believe that she'll be a contestant, but instead she's revealed as a pink soldier.

"The Pink Guards are not just violent or crazy, they have their own history and emotions and this shows both sides," says Park. "The main point of No-eul is how she could be so strong yet fragile. She had the least amount of moral values that human beings should have, so that was the motivation for her to exist in the *Squid Game* universe."

> "People have to help each other out and that's the only way out of this game"

The actor immersed herself in the character by creating her own history for No-eul, without telling the director. "It was a really complex character because she's vulnerable and fragile yet she's also strong and resilient. I made some backstory about how she could overcome all of those difficulties," she explains.

"I empathised with her feelings deep down in my heart and was really attached to her emotionally, so when it was

Let the games – and the fightback! – commence...

lights, camera, action, something came out from my gut. She was the most memorable character I've played in my whole life."

Park admits that she felt "pressure" and was "nervous" on her first day on set, but that this experience helped her develop as an actor, as she learned to block out the background noise and only focus on her character and the circumstances.

As a fan before joining the cast, Park felt first-hand the impact that the show had on audiences, which was a valuable insight. "It was a series that showed human emotions which can be simple yet very complicated. I thought about if I was there, what would I do in the game?" she says.

STICK OR TWIST

Squid Game has impacted audiences by putting them in the heart of the action, questioning what choices they would make if they were put in the same life-or-death situation. A voting process that was introduced in the final two seasons has seen the levels of greed and desperation become heightened further.

Writer-director Hwang quizzed himself throughout production as to which viewpoint he shared: Front Man's or Gi-hun's?

"I kept asking myself some questions: 'Do I have a hopeless view of this world? Am I pessimistic or hopeful? Do I see human existence in a pessimistic or optimistic light? Do I have a hopeless or hopeful view of the future?'" he recalls.

"These questions lingered in my mind while writing and shooting the series. I hope viewers will end up asking themselves the same questions. I eventually came to believe that, no matter how hopeless and dark the world and the events around us may seem, perhaps we still have a chance if we can find even a glimpse of hope within ourselves."

As the saga reaches its dramatic conclusion, Lee Jung-jae is preparing to let go of Gi-hun after four transformative years. The actor was a big name in Asia before *Squid Game*'s debut season was released in 2021, but his performance as Gi-hun turned him into a global superstar. Understandably, emotions were high on the last day of filming. "I poured my heart and soul into this project for so many years," he says. "When I first met Gi-hun, I really wanted to do a good job with this guy and really flesh out this character and add vitality to the show. As Gi-hun, and also Lee Jung-Jae, I have so many memories with the cast and crew that helped make *Squid Game*. I felt very emotional and thought of all the fans and global audience who cheered for this project and so many thoughts were rolling around in my head."

It was also an emotional experience for Hwang, as the series is a deeply personal project, inspired by his economic difficulties during the debt crisis in South Korea in 2008.

"I poured over six years of my life into *Squid Game*, not even counting when I first wrote the original script, more than a decade ago. There were times I was completely exhausted and under immense pressure, but I know I'll miss even those moments some day," he says. "The moments when what I had envisioned in my head was actually materialising right in front of me, seeing scenes come to life – even better than I imagined – was deeply moving."

While he hasn't dismissed the possibility of revisiting the *Squid Game* universe for spin-offs or further series, this likely won't be any time soon... "I'll miss and hold onto that feeling for a long time. But if you were to ask whether I'd do it all again, I'm not sure I'd have the stamina."

Fingers crossed that luck is on our side...

Squid Game is on Netflix from 27 June.

LIFE FINDS ANOTHER WAY

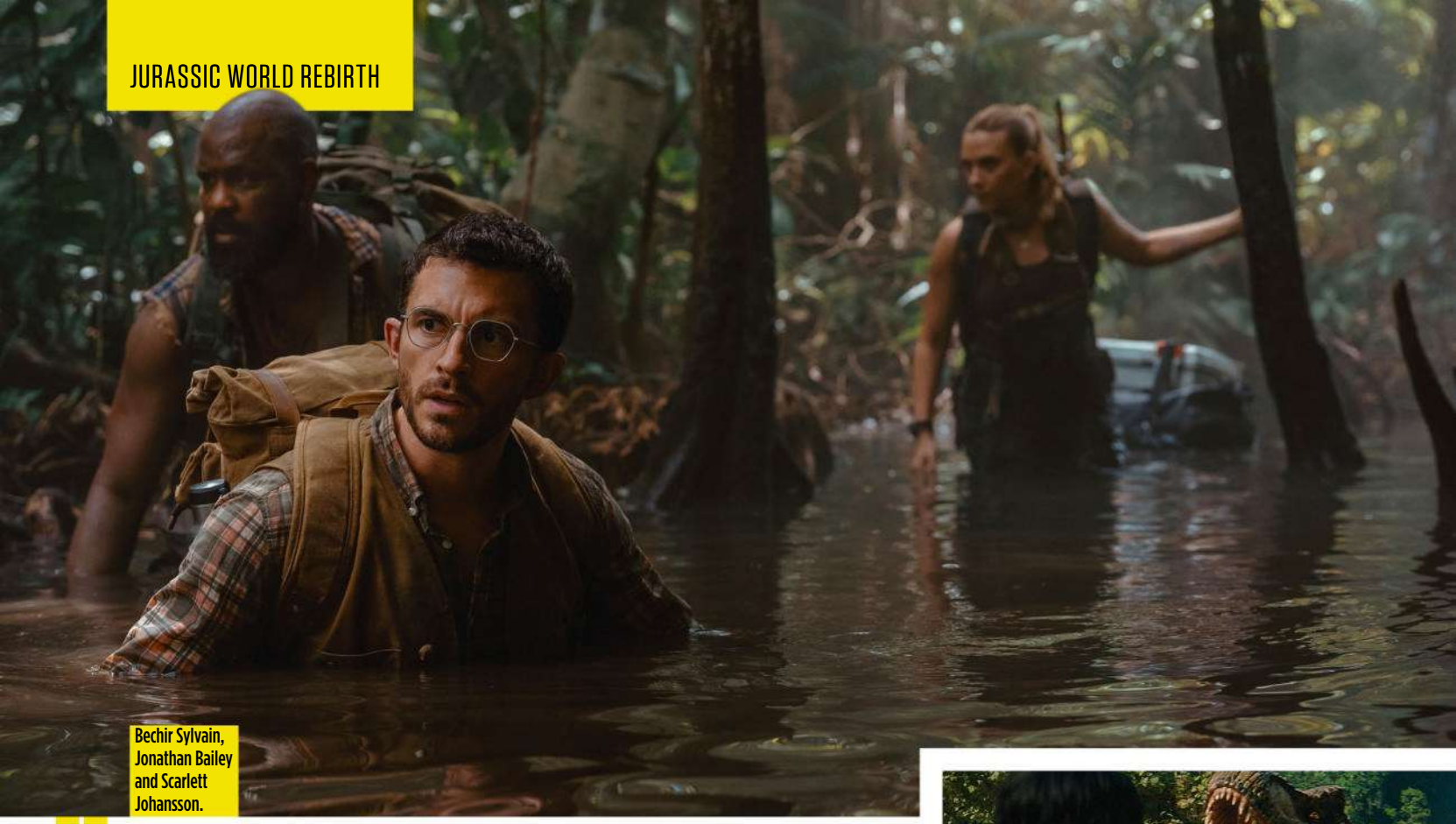
WORDS: TARA BENNETT

DIRECTOR GARETH EDWARDS WORKS WITH HIS HERO, STEVEN SPIELBERG, TO REINVIGORATE THE JURASSIC WORLD FRANCHISE FOR A NEW GENERATION

WHEN *SFX* LAST SPOKE WITH director Gareth Edwards in autumn 2023, he was decompressing from locking *The Creator* and was contemplating what his movie-making future might look like in the wake of its release. Extremely satisfied with how he was able to marry the "pros of a small independent film and the pros of a big blockbuster" on that film, Edwards said he was planning to only chase that model going forward.

And then Team Spielberg came calling with *Jurassic World Rebirth*.

Edwards tells *SFX* that he unintentionally started manifesting his next gig during New Year's Eve of 2023, when he spontaneously collected his girlfriend to usher in 2024 at Universal Studios Hollywood, a local haunt when he's working in Los Angeles. →



Bechir Sylvain, Jonathan Bailey and Scarlett Johansson.

"I spent New Year's Eve on the Jurassic World ride," Edwards says, smiling. "I took a picture, and I sent it to Colin Trevorrow, who's a friend of mine, saying, 'This is me, New Year's Eve, like rock and roll.' Little did I know it was gonna herald in this year where I was gonna get to direct one."

Edwards swears he was planning on taking a rest. In fact by early 2024, he says he was in the midst of an exercise that he considers to be downtime fun, which is dissecting his favourite films on paper, distilling them into beats or short phrases, all in service of "trying to crack the code of what makes a good film".

He'd just done that for *Jurassic Park*, and the next day the trades announced that Universal Pictures was still looking for a director for the next instalment of their *Jurassic World* franchise. Because he'd just spent the previous day working on that document, Edwards says, his girlfriend texted him the intel while he was on a phone call to his editor Jabez Olssen.

"I saw it, and I just copied and pasted it to my agent and wrote, 'Is this stupid?'" he remembers. "I carried on with my phone call, and when I hung up I saw that I had four missed calls from my agent. I was like, 'Oh no. What have I done?'"

It's all smiles until the crunching begins.

He immediately called back and found out that lo and behold, producer Frank Marshall had just called on behalf of Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment asking about Edwards's interest in directing the new *Jurassic World* film – at which point his own text had landed and his agent had burst out laughing. Edwards was given the weekend to read the script and respond yay or nay by Monday.

"I read this screenplay wanting to hate it because I just wanted to have a break," he remembers. "I was all ready for the polite, 'No.' Like, 'Oh, it was really good, but I just want to do my own thing. Thank you for considering me.' I got to the end of the screenplay and was like, 'Oh shit, it's good. Damn it.'"

Edwards says the story possessed all the Spielbergian hallmarks that he loves. "Steven had conceived it with David Koepp, who is an exceptional writer," he says. "All the characters really popped out. It was just one of those things where it was like, I can't not do this.

"Also, it was all going to be done in about a year. It was just like, 'Okay, I'm not going to be able to do anything but this.' But it was an opportunity of a lifetime, to some extent. I dove in, really. We're only just coming up for air. This is me coming up for air now, doing this interview."

Just two weeks later, Edwards was officially announced as the director and the countdown clock began. He had just 17 months to prep, shoot and edit this July 2025-releasing blockbuster.

Rebirth takes place five years after the events of *Jurassic World Dominion* and centres on a covert, pharmaceutical company-backed mission of three who travel to a long abandoned, uncharted island that was the original Jurassic Park research facility. The two covert retrieval experts (Scarlett Johansson and Mahershala Ali) and a paleontologist (Jonathan Baile) are there to find dino biomaterials for future drug discoveries. The only problem is, the dinos still living there in isolation have evolved and mutated in very human-unfriendly ways.

Imagine being a dinosaur with lockjaw. Oof.

Knowing that he wasn't going to be able to "reinvent the wheel" on this one, Edwards says he looked to the many lessons he learned on his other blockbuster experiences, from *Godzilla* to *Rogue One*, and collected his most trusted collaborators to work with him on *Rebirth*.

"It was really important to take them with me on this," he says. "A big factor in that was James Clyne, who was our production designer on *The Creator*. We spent the whole of the pandemic trying to get this sci-fi aesthetic right. I knew, with the timeframe we had, if I got James on we wouldn't have to talk much. He already knows exactly what I like and don't like, so getting him on board was crucial. That was the only way I could imagine doing

Zora and Dr Henry Loomis talk tactics tensely.

it to be honest, as we had so much to design so quickly."

For his cinematographer, Edwards went back to a film he considers "visually stunning", Ridley Scott's *Kingdom Of Heaven*. "John Matheson was the director of photography and the more and more I looked at it, the more I was like, 'This is perfection. There's not a bad frame in this movie,'" he explains.

"I've always had this love for his work. When you start a film like this, you have a group of names you'd like to work with, and the studio have a group of names they would trust. Then there's Steven as well in the middle of that. There was this one little overlap where they all intersected, and everyone agreed on Matheson."

Philippine Velge and her Spinosaurus pal.

Lastly, he was able to woo *Jurassic World Dominion* VFX supervisor David Vickery to come back to this world. "He's just brilliant and he's kind of like the world's best person at dinosaurs," Edwards says. "But he was sort of done with doing dinosaur films. He didn't want to do another one.

"So I just said to David, 'I don't want this to feel animated. I don't want it to feel like we've anthropomorphised these creatures. I would love it if we could build a massive catalogue of natural history and essentially, every single shot in this movie is based on a piece of existing footage of a real animal really doing whatever it is that's happening."

That naturalistic approach sealed the deal. Edwards had his elite team, and they were all off and running to the wilds of Thailand, Malta and the UK to bring dinosaurs back to life.

Asked where everyone's heads were, in terms of how to reinvent the franchise and surprise audiences again, Edwards is honest in saying that in the early days of production he didn't really know the answer.

"When you start something, you don't really have a meeting about aesthetic," he explains. "I think Steven, as a filmmaker, would never do that to another filmmaker. He's sort of like, 'It's your baby. Now, run with it.' So then it's where can I go and what can I do that feels unique, but it's still *Jurassic*. Those boundaries, or what that is, you discover as you go, between you and the crew, then gauging Steven's responses to things when we're showing him stuff.

"To be honest, I would have killed to just emulate Steven," Edwards admits. "I think he's a genius, obviously, and one of the greatest filmmakers ever. I was constantly trying to just be as good as that."

He says on the journey to set every day, he would watch supercuts he edited together of classic Spielberg scenes. "I put them into different categories and I would watch a category. Not to copy anything," he clarifies. "It's like to create an AI model in your brain of all this stuff, and then hopefully it just comes out of you. Like, if you eat loads of garlic, you start to stink of garlic, right? I'm trying to eat Spielberg, to stink of Spielberg, if I could," he laughs.

He says he also got hyper-focused on why the best chapters of the franchise worked so well. "The reason I get excited about a *Jurassic* film is, it's like a horror film on the witness protection program. It pretends it's a family adventure. It introduces itself to everyone, and then you sit down, and you go, 'Hey, wait a minute, there's a massive T. rex, and there are kids in a jeep. Hang on?'"

Edwards says Koepp's script recaptured that alchemy through a series of impressive set-pieces. "It has these builds to a climax and then a reset, and a build to a new climax and a reset, then the whole thing links together at the end. It's got this natural rhythm to it where I can keep playing that game again because it's a journey across the island," he explains.

"The whole thing is an exercise of playing with the audience and their expectations and assumptions about what they think is going to happen. It's fun to be toyed with like that when you sit in the cinema. You know you're in the hands of someone else and it's controlled storytelling."

> **"It was an opportunity of a lifetime, to some extent. We're only just coming up for air"**

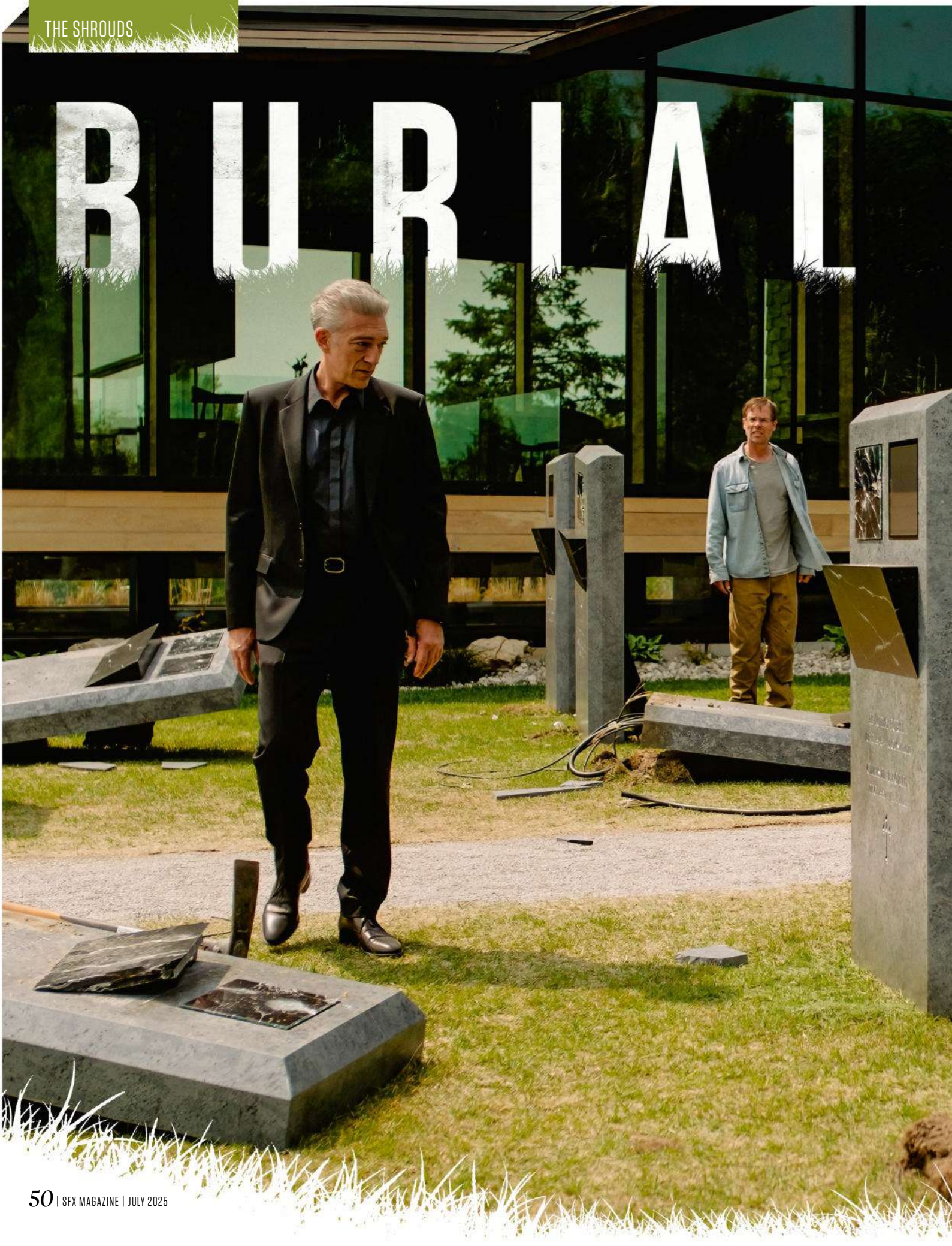
Edwards was humbled that Spielberg handed him the reins to find his own way to do just that. "He was very supportive, and he was very complimentary about what we'd shot. He's really, really kind about it all," he says, recalling how Spielberg reacted after being shown some of the first action dailies. "He loved what he was seeing and said, 'Oh, you need to do some handheld?' And I went, 'Yeah, sure.' I thought to myself, 'I think he just gave me licence to do my style, a little bit.'"

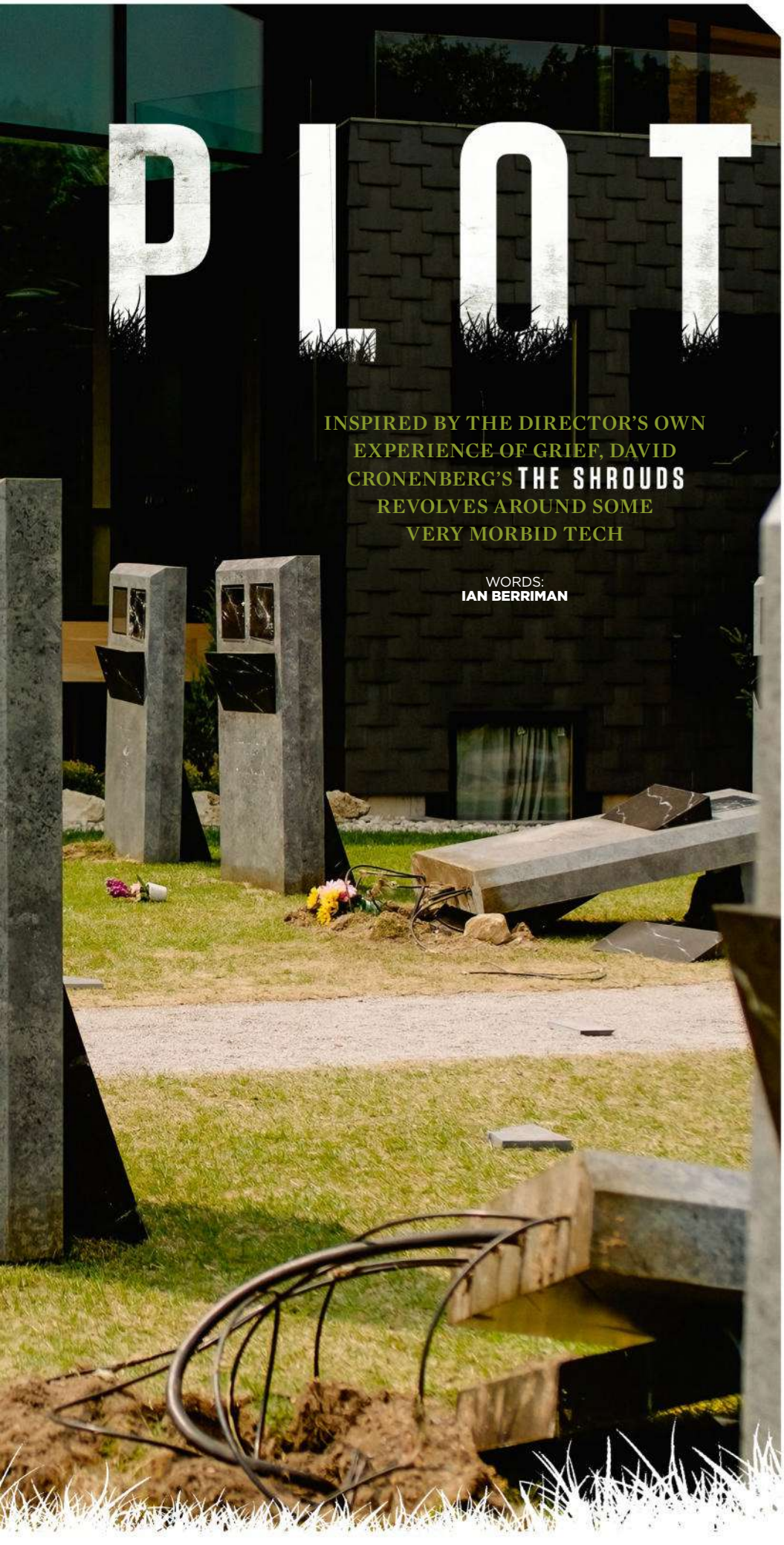
In the edit phase now, Edwards says he's pleased with the roller coaster feel of *Rebirth*. "Where we've landed now, which is a nice, interesting place, is that I don't have a favourite moment in the film. There's lots of sections where I go, 'Oh, this is good.'

"Once it gets going, you can feel that in the design of the piece as it keeps trying to top itself. It's just a bit of a ride, really. So I'm really looking forward to sitting in a cinema with everyone for this one."

Jurassic World Rebirth is in cinemas from 2 July.

BURIAL





PLOT

INSPIRED BY THE DIRECTOR'S OWN EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF, DAVID CRONENBERG'S THE SHROUDS REVOLVES AROUND SOME VERY MORBID TECH

WORDS:
IAN BERRIMAN

IF THERE'S ONE DIRECTOR WHO usually ducks biographical interpretations of their work, it's David Cronenberg – for obvious reasons. No one's likely to assume he has personal experience of, say, developing a blood-sucking organ in his armpit (*Rabid*), exploding heads with telekinetic powers (*Scanners*), or splicing his DNA with an insect (*The Fly*).

That said, the director's personal life did factor into 1979's *The Brood*, which saw Cronenberg drawing on an acrimonious custody battle for the tale of a man whose daughter is kidnapped by deformed children spawned spontaneously through his estranged wife's rage. Now there's a second Cronenberg film which will tempt future authors of monographs to take a biographical approach, because *The Shrouds* was sparked by the director going through the wringer with grief.

The high concept is... quite something. Vincent Cassel plays Karsh, developer of GraveTech – a system which, by wrapping a deceased person in a high-tech shroud, allows the bereaved to observe a 3D image of a loved one's corpse as it decays, on a screen on their tombstone, or beamed to an app.

If you're thinking, "WTF? Who'd pay for *that*?", well... nowadays, who knows? "When I've been doing Q&As, I've been offering franchises to the audience," Cronenberg tells *SFX*, with a wry smile. "You can start with one small grave in your backyard, to see how it feels, then expand. It could be my version of McDonald's..."

The Shrouds had its origins in a series pitch for Netflix, at a point when Cronenberg had become fascinated by the streaming phenomenon. "It had always occurred to me that feature films were basically novellas, or even short stories, rather than novels," he says, "Whereas a streaming series that was eight, 10 hours could really be the equivalent of a novel. I thought it would be interesting to see what I could do in that format."

COMING TO GRIEF

In 2017, Cronenberg's wife of 43 years, Carolyn, died of cancer. Afterwards, the director explains, "I really wasn't sure that I would make another movie, but I eventually did – *Crimes Of The Future* [2022]. Then I thought, 'It's probably time for me to address the loss of my wife, in some fictional way.' That was the impetus, because here I was in my late seventies thinking, 'I have experienced things that I had never experienced before', so I needed to address them creatively. The two things came together."

Netflix executives were sufficiently intrigued to okay the writing of a first episode, then a second, at which point the project proceeded no further. Cronenberg is unsure why →

Diane Kruger plays multiple roles in the movie.

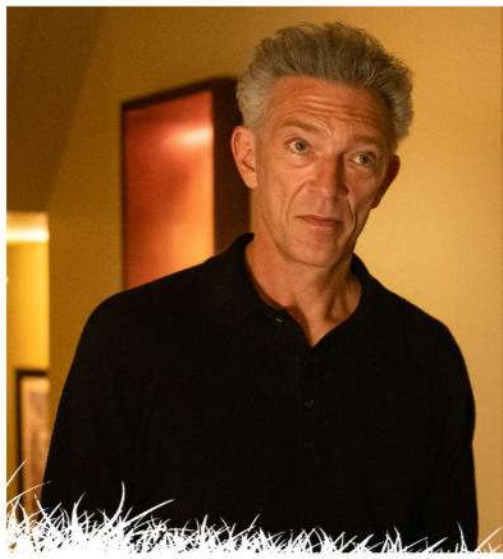
Vincent Cassel as Karsh – or is it David Cronenberg?

("They weren't very forthcoming"), but speculates that his plans were deemed too expensive. "Every episode would take place in a different country, and that's not cheap. I had a lot of ideas about where it would go, because burial is such an innate human societal event, and varies incredibly from culture to culture. Once you delve into it, it can get pretty strange.

"Burial customs always involve politics, they involve religion, they involve money, they involve war. So as Karsh innocently decides to go to various countries and set up this high tech graveyard, he'd get involved in a lot of these things. There was tons of material there that was, to me, very intriguing and exciting and fruitful, but I never got to do that aspect of it. But I liked what I had written, so I decided to see if I could make a movie out of it."

The fact that the film is rooted in personal experience inevitably piques people's curiosity as to *how* personal it is. Are there elements of Karsh's response to grief that mirror his own? Cronenberg is keen to stress that this is a work of fiction. "Every film that a filmmaker makes, especially if they've written it themselves, is autobiographical in some sense," he notes.

Sandrine Holt plays blind character Soo-min Szabo.



Karsh's high-tech burial shroud.

"You come from an understanding of what narrative is, and it's formed by your environment, how you were raised, your education, what movies you've seen. So there is autobiography in every creative act."

He also questions the assumption that because something's based on – to use the buzz phrase du jour – "lived experience", that somehow gives it more validity. "It's interesting to talk about, but at a certain point it's irrelevant because the fact that something 'really happened', in quotes, doesn't make it valuable, doesn't make it philosophically pungent. I mean, *War And Peace*: how much of that was something that Tolstoy actually experienced? Does it matter?"

Having said all that – and having noted that *The Shrouds* includes many inventions ("I'm not a high-tech entrepreneur!") – Cronenberg acknowledges that "I wouldn't have had the insight to create Karsh in his grief if I hadn't experienced it myself. Many of the things that he says and does are things that I said and did."

It would be intrusive to check off a list: did Cronenberg, like Karsh, feel like climbing inside his wife's coffin? Did he feel the need to sell the matrimonial home? But it seems a safe bet that he shared the way Karsh dwells on the physicality of his dead wife, Becca, who appears to him naked in recurring dreams.

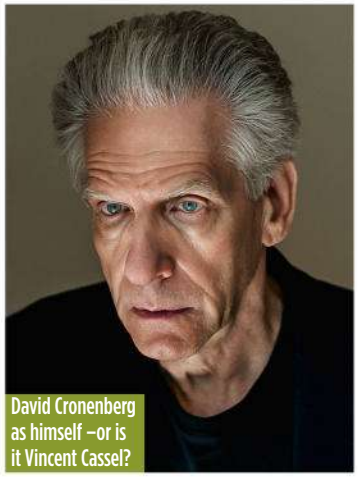
"I've read all the grief literature, like Joan Didion's *The Year Of Magical Thinking*, and CS Lewis [*A Grief Observed*], and Julian Barnes's reminiscence [*Levels Of Life*], all about loss of a partner, and I realised that although there were slight resonances in my experience with theirs, not as much as you would think," Cronenberg observes. "So I felt, no, it's not a totally universal thing, it's a very specific, particular thing.

"In Joan Didion's book, she almost never mentions [her husband's] body," he continues. "She talks about his voice and his humour, but it's very intellectual, very abstract. I thought, 'If you read that, you'd think they never took pleasure in each other's bodies.' For me, I can't imagine how it could not be physical, the loss of a loved one – especially a lover that you've been making love to for 40 years or whatever."

It would be trite to suggest that making a film like *The Shrouds* is cathartic, but does Cronenberg derive any consolation from transmuting such distressing emotions into art?

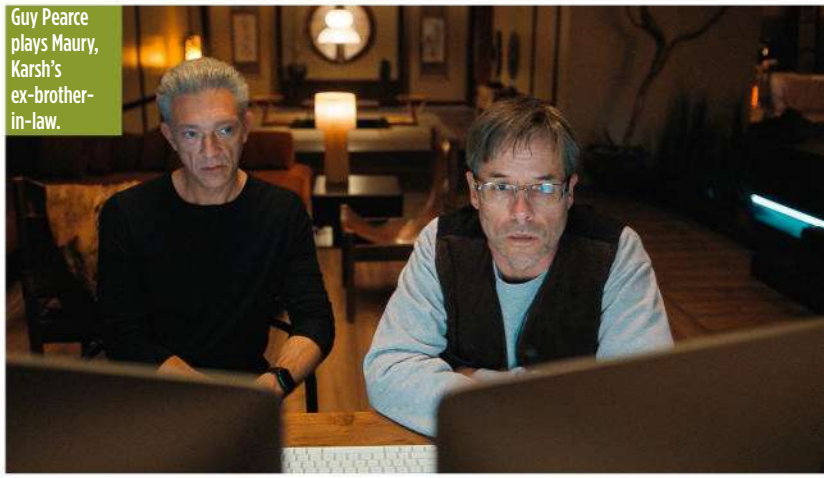
"No," he says bluntly. "It's the creative impulse, always, to express what's going on inside you in an exterior way, whether it's painting or sculpture or whatever. But to me, art is not therapy. So no. The grief is the same: the same potency, the same inability to escape it when it decides to rise up in you – it takes you by surprise."

The Shrouds feels very of the moment. For starters, it seems to reflect the blizzard of misinformation in which we now exist. Definitive answers to its central mystery – who vandalised several GraveTech headstones, including Becca's – are elusive, as theories



David Cronenberg as himself –or is it Vincent Cassel?

PHOTO: CAITLIN CRONENBERG



Guy Pearce plays Maury, Karsh's ex-brother-in-law.

Kruger stars as both Karsh's wife Becca and her sister Terry.

swirl about Russian hackers and Becca's doctor. Cronenberg argues that open endings have their benefits. "I think if a movie is really alive, the characters in your head continue after the movie is over – you feel there's life that they're going to live. So this is taking that seriously and saying, 'Nothing gets resolved.'"

That flurry of competing explanations also reflects another aspect of grief. "Conspiracy can be a strategy to deal with grief, because when somebody dies it's meaningless," Cronenberg observes. "Each person is like a universe, so complex and full and ongoing with life, and suddenly ends in an instant.

"That's unacceptable. It's impossible to absorb. So by saying, 'That wasn't an accident, somebody wanted this person dead', it gives you some meaning. We've evolved to look for meaning in everything. I think that's really the point: that in a way you don't want it to resolve, because to resolve it is too disturbing. It's the existentialist understanding that, from the philosophical point of view, life is absurd."

Another way Karsh has channelled his feelings is to create a digital assistant with Becca's likeness – something well within the capabilities of current tech. In devising this AI character, Hunny, Cronenberg reasoned that the businessman would decide against giving her an uncannily realistic form. "That would be too head on, too painful. So he makes her into a kind of cartoon character, kind of an emoji version."

Diane Kruger, who plays Becca, didn't just provide the voice of this AI. "She was in a full motion-capture suit, with a camera looking into her face," Cronenberg explains, "in a big warehouse all alone, surrounded by about 14 cameras and acting the role." Tucked away in these sequences, incidentally, is some subtle product placement for a fashion house who provided funding. "Saint Laurent wanted to get as many items of clothing in the movie as possible. Most of the characters wouldn't be wearing Saint Laurent, but Hunny could. So Hunny, at some points, is wearing a Saint Laurent scarf. There was some fun playing with that."

On the subject of AI, we wonder what Cronenberg's feelings are about its accelerating encroachment into everyday life. "It's the same as with any other technical innovation," he replies. "It comes with social dangers like people losing jobs, and AI comes with the additional danger of possibly causing strange disruptions in human society! You wouldn't really want AI to be controlling the nuclear stockpile. But it's a potent creative tool."

Director David Cronenberg on set.

The director is certainly no nostalgist. "I would never want to work with real film again," he remarks. "Digital is so much more flexible – it works much more like the way the human mind works. Digital editing was a great innovation. So it's the same."

He references the recent "kerfuffle" about the use of AI to perfect Adrien Brody's Hungarian accent for *The Brutalist*, and the ensuing questions. "'Does this mean that it's not really his performance?' Well, directors have messed around with actors' dialogue from the beginning. That's what we do: we take a line of dialogue from here and put it in the mouth of a visual from there, and we cut up the dialogue and rearrange it.

> **"If a movie is really alive, the characters in your head continue after the movie is over"**

"Actors in film have always had their dialogue messed around with. "For example," he continues, "in *M Butterfly* [his 1993 film featuring a male Chinese opera singer who plays female roles] I raised the pitch of John Lone's voice when he was being a woman, and I lowered the pitch when he was being a man. Nobody noticed it, or cared, at the time. That wasn't AI, but it was manipulation of an actor's delivery of dialogue."

Now that *The Shrouds* is rolling out, how does the director feel about a film which germinated in the soil of his personal pain being loose in the world? However fictionalised it may be, there's a degree to which he's revealing himself. "It puts you in a position a lot of people would not want to be in, which is you're very vulnerable," he reflects. "You're putting your grief out there, for anybody to make any kind of comment they want.

"But that is the nature of art. You have to be vulnerable if you're an artist – there's no other way."

The Shrouds is in cinemas from 4 July.

PO
FORWARD
BACK
AUTO RETURN
DOWN

UK EXCLUSIVE

WE'RE THAT BE

SHOWRUNNER JACK BENDER TUNES INTO STEPHEN KING'S FREQUENCY FOR THE INSTITUTE, A SERIES ABOUT KIDS WITH PSYCHIC ABILITIES

WORDS: **JAMIE GRAHAM**

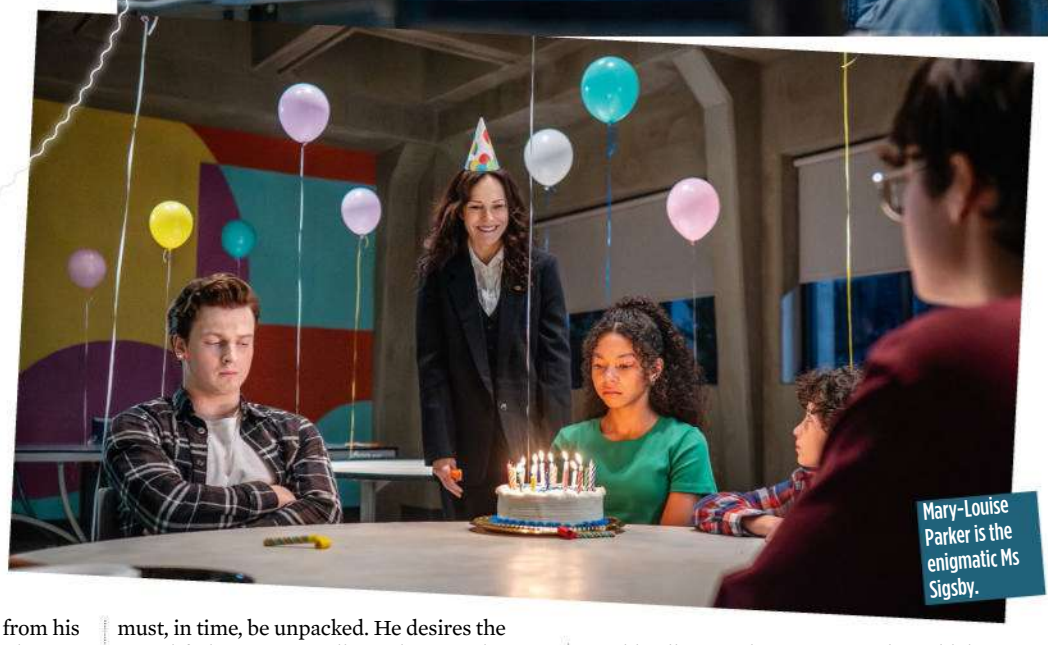
THE INSTITUTE

Luke Ellis (Joe Freeman) must undergo the Institute's tests.

OVER THE LAST DECADE, Mike Flanagan has become the go-to director for Stephen King adaptations, convincingly bringing *Gerald's Game*, *Doctor Sleep* and *The Life Of Chuck* (in cinemas in August) to the screen.

But there's another name that is becoming synonymous with King: Jack Bender, who worked as executive producer on the TV shows *Under The Dome*, *Mr Mercedes* and *The Outsider*. And while Flanagan currently has a *Carrie* series in development at Amazon, Bender has beaten him to the punch with his own adaptation of a King novel about kids with psychic powers, *The Institute*.

"Stephen sent me the galleys for [2019 novel] *The Institute*," says Bender, who's also directed episodes of *The Sopranos*, *Lost* and *Game Of Thrones*. "He loved, loved, loved *Mr Mercedes*. When we first discussed *Mr Mercedes*, he asked whether it should be a movie or a series. I said to him, 'Stephen, this first book is 600 pages, chock-full of brilliant characters. We need to spend time [with them].' It felt that way with *The Institute*, too, because I didn't want to just do an X-kids movie."



Mary-Louise Parker is the enigmatic Ms Sigsby.

The Institute tracks teen genius Luke Ellis (Joe Freeman). Kidnapped from his home in suburban Minneapolis, he awakens in the titular structure in Maine, one of several kids who find themselves contained, having exhibited mild telepathic or telekinetic abilities (a tray that wobbles then flips in an early scene in a diner recalls the ashtray in the principal's office in Brian De Palma's *Carrie*). The director of the Institute, Ms Sigsby (Mary-Louise Parker), oversees a series

> **"Stephen King writes about the monsters inside people, not just outside"**

of experiments designed to unleash the kids' powers. Once the TPs and TKs, as they're known, gain a certain strength, they're moved from the Front Half of the building to the Back Half – never to be seen again. Luke soon comes to believe that their collective abilities are being weaponised.

Meanwhile, a separate story strand follows ex-cop Tim (Ben Barnes) as he moves from Florida to the small town of DuPray in South Carolina and becomes a patrolman. A gentle, modest man, Tim begins a relationship with a deputy, Wendy (Hannah Galway), but he's carrying baggage from his previous life that must, in time, be unpacked. He desires the quiet life, but it's naturally not long until Tim's plotline entwines with Luke's, and any thoughts of peace are blown sky-high.

HEART OF DARKNESS

In many ways, *The Institute* is classic King, not just because it sees a band of kids battle evil (*It*) but because it returns to his favourite theme of the '70s and early '80s: the curse/gift of mental powers (*Carrie*, *The Shining*, *Firestarter*, *The Dead Zone*). For a younger generation, though, the connection may lie elsewhere.

"*Stranger Things* is wonderfully done but it is drawn with crayons – very colourful," says Bender of the smash Netflix show that owes much to King. "It speaks to that time of filmmaking, in the '80s. But I always felt that *The Institute* was much more sophisticated, and darker. I love when Stephen King writes about the monsters inside people, not just outside. *The Institute* is that."

Dark and thorny enough for David E Kelley (*Big Little Lies*, *The Lincoln Lawyer*) to be linked to adapting the book for Bender in 2019, *The Institute* emerged as a new production after the pandemic. It was announced, in June 2024, that Bender would still act as showrunner and would direct a chunk of the eight episodes, but that Benjamin Cavell (*Justified* and King's apocalyptic epic *The Stand*) and Sam Sheridan (*I Am The Night*) would now script. One of Bender's first decisions was to age up the imprisoned protagonists by a few years ("What these kids are put through is so harsh and difficult – you could even describe it as tortuous – and I didn't want a sadistic show," he says). In the book, Luke is 12, but for Bender it was essential to find the right teenager.

To say that Joe Freeman, who had previously appeared in just one episode of the BBC1 soap *Doctors*, has the goods is an understatement. All it takes is 10 seconds of screen time to know he's a star. "It's alchemy," shrugs Bender, who felt the same when he sat down to the audition tape. "And I guess it's genetic, with his parents [actors Martin Freeman and Amanda Abbington]. We knew that we had to find someone who could balance enough grit and screw-you attitude and yet be this kid that we care about and relate to. And Joe is a phenomenon. The minute he came on the screen, I went, 'Oh my God, he's just amazing.'"

Shot in Nova Scotia

PICTURES: CHRIS REARDON / MGM+

Ben Barnes is Tim

The Punisher actor shows his good side by playing decorated cop Tim Jamieson

Are you a fan of Stephen King's work?
I am a fan. I'm more of a fantasy, thriller, sci-fi, mystery reader. He writes a lot of premise-heavy stuff that I love. *The Shawshank Redemption* is one of the films I've watched the most in my life. Anything with a mystery/thriller bent, that is absolutely my cup of tea.

Did they come to you for the role?
I had a new team of agents and they suggested I read the book. I was thinking, "That's very proactive!" But I was really grateful, because when I got there I had all these thoughts about it. We just got into a really dynamic chat about the show and the characters. We were getting excited, throwing ideas around, and that chat really informed what we did with the season.

What was the main appeal of Tim?
I remember on our first chat, they were like, "We like this idea of the reluctant hero." It's made a bit of a resurgence in something like *The Last Of Us*, but it's been missing on screens, that reluctant hero – the *Shane*-like cowboy. Tim's been through something before the show starts, something that's weighing heavily on him, and he wants to get away to a quieter time. The thing I pitched when I met the team was the reluctant hero who deep down knows he's someone who can't let it go, if there's a sniff of injustice. It's got him in trouble before.

He's a good guy...
It was very important to me to be playing someone with a real moral compass, because [I had] five, six years on *Westworld* and *The Punisher* and *Shadow And Bone*, where I played at best untrustworthy characters, and at worst evil psychopaths. So, post-pandemic... It matters what you put into the world and I wanted to balance the scales a little bit.

The structure of *The Institute* is interesting: the way you start off having your own storyline and then entwine with the kids.
The book is poetic, descriptive. Especially when it's about Tim – it's kind of lonely, the way it's written, so there's space to stretch into that character. You're almost watching this lonely-cop indie movie at the same time as you're watching this exciting Institute TV show – this junior Shawshank situation – and wondering when they're going to marry. It really takes off when the two stories collide.

> "The thing I pitched was a reluctant hero who can't let it go"

Joe Freeman is a real talent, isn't he?
I saw it at the readthrough. He said two lines – he was even looking down at his script, anxious – and I just sat up, like [mimes slack-jacked amazement]. He's got a zest and a fire in him, with a fragility that's buried way underneath it. He's perfect for that character. I was like, "Oh yeah, this is gonna work."

Like the kids' powers, the show starts off contained but busts out. How did you find the later set-pieces?
I felt a little bit "caged tiger" for the first few episodes. In a good way. My energy was building. In the gym, I was thinking about kicking down the doors of The Institute. I couldn't wait! I was excited to do scenes with Joe. Once Tim meets with Luke, he gets interactions with people in scenes that are full of intrigue and tension, all those good things that you hope for as an actor.

What endgame is in sight for Ms Sigsby and the Institute?

between August and November of 2024, *The Institute* blends elements of science fiction, horror, thriller and mystery into a slow-burn drama that carefully widens in scope even as it feathers its two plotlines. There is, should you want it, a political element, too, with King on record saying he sees similarities between The Institute's kids being torn from their homes, and horrific real-life events during the first Trump administration: "Children seeking asylum at the border... being removed from their parents under the administration's family-separation policy," said King.

"Now is the right time for this show because it does speak to all of that," nods Bender. "I also love that the villains, who are doing things that none of us would condone, whether you have kids or not, whatever your life path is... but according to them, they are saving the world. Mary-Louise has this extraordinary monologue where she justifies why they do what they do. These people believe what they believe. There are definitely a couple of sadists in the group, but for the most part, they're true believers."

Which makes it all the more scary. But whatever the nature of the evil faced in a King story, there is always the indomitable human spirit to put up the good fight. "Hope Springs Eternal" is the section heading to the novella *Rita Hayworth And Shawshank Redemption* in King's collection of four tales *Different Seasons*, and it's an adage that applies to all of the author's work. Call it humanistic horror.

"Ultimately it's about the power of these young people," explains Bender of *The Institute*. "There's that phrase: 'The meek shall inherit the Earth.' And I thought about, 'Children shall inherit the Earth but first they have to save themselves.' I thought about the horrible school shootings, and the Parkland school, and how they're now practically their own political party – they've grown after college into this powerful group of people who are telling the older politicians, 'Get out of the way because you've screwed it up and we're going to save ourselves, make it better.'"

The Institute is a show about hidden special powers that has its own hidden special powers. Let's hope it helps move the needle.

The Institute is on MGM+ from 13 July.

Clemens on the set of *Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter*.

THE BRIAN CLEMENS ARCHIVE PART TWO

IN THE SECOND OF A SERIES OF FEATURES, WE PRESENT SEVEN BOND MOVIE PITCHES BY THE LATE, GREAT BRIAN CLEMENS

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**

AS YOU'LL KNOW IF YOU READ our feature last issue, Brian Clemens – script editor of *The Avengers*, and creator of *The New Avengers* and *The Professionals* – left behind a vast amount of paperwork when he passed away in 2015, which his sons George and Sam have been scanning and cataloguing.

It wasn't particularly well-organised during his lifetime. Sam describes his father's working environment: "I remember there were two piles of paper either side. One was, like, banks and legal, and the other was all scripts and things, and he was working in the middle of it – it was hilarious. You couldn't touch it. He'd get so annoyed if you got near it, because only he knew what was there, and if you started moving things he'd never know where anything was. That's why it's taken us literally 10 years to go through it."

One of their most exciting discoveries was a 10-page document containing seven James Bond concepts. They're dated April and May 1975 – a year before *The Spy Who Loved Me* went into production. "We were amazed when we found it," says Sam, "Because he spoke about it for years, these Bond ideas, and we were like, 'It'd be great if we could see them.' And he didn't think he had them. So when we found them: 'Oh my god, this is incredible!' We thought this was a myth that he'd spoken about – 'Oh yeah, you wrote for Bond...'"

Clemens did pitch his ideas to producers Cubby Broccoli and Harry Saltzman, but nothing came of it. "I think he was disappointed it didn't happen," says Sam, "Because it would have been a match made in heaven – the tone of *The Avengers* is not dissimilar in terms of its charm to Bond, in terms of the quips and the witty banter, and the action.

"One of them loved the ideas and the other one – I can't remember which one it was – didn't, because they weren't from the books," he continues, recalling what his father told them. "That's what the problem was. They were sort of still doing the books, so that's why they never came to fruition." (Mind you, *The Spy Who Loved Me* bears no relation to the Ian Fleming novel, so perhaps this was simply a polite excuse.)

The Avengers fans reading Bond Project Two may find it rather familiar, as the plot, which sees criminals drugging the New York water supply to carry out "the biggest heist of all time", is very similar to "Sleeper", a 1976 episode of *The New Avengers* in which criminals incapacitate the population of London via sleeping gas. Not for the first time, Clemens recycled one of his ideas... "He would always be like, 'It's a homage to myself!'" Sam laughs.

And 007 fans reading Bond Project One may also experience flashes of déjà vu. For starters, Clemens floats the idea of a "tank chase" set-piece. "It's not dissimilar to *GoldenEye*, is it?" smiles Sam, referencing the sequence where Pierce Brosnan's Bond wreaks havoc on the streets of Saint Petersburg. The similarities are more striking when it comes to the lead villain. Clemens's "man who likes war" sells arms, has a private army, lives like a general, recreates famous battles with automated toy soldiers, and has a house filled with busts of Napoleon. In 1987's *The Living Daylights*, Joe Don Baker plays Brad Whitaker, an arms dealer who acts like a general, has a private army, recreates famous battles with automated toy soldiers, and has statues of various "great commanders" – including Napoleon. Hmm...

"I'm sure there's some stuff that is complete coincidence," says George, "and there's other stuff where it's a bit sketchy from our end, but we'll never know one way or another. Going through the archive, it's quite surprising how many things Dad came up with. But then, he was an ideas man. He'd always be throwing ideas left, right and centre. So I guess that other people will probably hit on the same ideas at some point in later years."

The brothers have kindly allowed us to reproduce their father's Bond pitches. As the original pages are a little faded, for the sake of legibility we've typed them up again. In doing so, we've retained typos and spelling mistakes, as well as most of Brian's punctuation, removing only the double spaces.

Read on to discover the Bond characters and situations which could have been, including a blind bodyguard who wields a deadly white stick, a cyborg version of US Secretary Of State Henry Kissinger, a killer rabbit and more! →

Brian Clemens's 1974 film Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter is available on 4K and Blu-ray now – visit hammerfilms.com for details. A book about him, written by Robert Sellers in collaboration with the family, is in the works.

The Spy Who Loved Me had a Soviet agent too!

"BOND PROJECT ONE".

The man who likes war! Lives off it, feeds off it - economically and psychologically.

For a start, he manufactures and sells arms. Has teams of men inventing new war devices. So, wherever there is violence he has a lot to gain.. in many ways:

1) He exploits knowing ahead of time just when and where a war will start.

2) During a war millions in money - in gold reserves - in art treasures - can disappear... presumed destroyed in action or looted. THIS man has trained teams of looters.

There is not one aspect of war that does not offer him a profit... and fascinate him totally.

He hates the current mood of peace between the nations - therefore he 'backs' outbreaks of terrorism as a producer might back a movie!

He even starts them if he has to.

Whatever happens - he has to win. He is completely UNpolitical - he may begin by backing the Red side - then see a bigger profit in the Blue side - and switch alleagiance mid-stream!

Since he often supplies arms to BOTH sides - it is in his interests to keep the trouble brewing!

And where-ever there is trouble - his observers are on the scene - fanning the flames higher.. and looking for talent!

Oh, yes - when-ever a really great terrorist shows himself - then he is coersed or invited to join our villain's private army!

Yes, he has the greatest bunch of soldiers in the world - all his own. Hand-picked paras and mercenaries, in the peak of physical condition, and at the peak of training. Specialists all of them.

Our villain lives like a general (like Napoleon actually - and his vast home is filled with busts, etc.. of Napoleon) - he can quote you every great battle ever fought. When he isn't drilling his own men - he is playing with vast automated toy soldiers - recreating Crecy and Waterloo and Alamein.

Sometimes he travels in his vast, vast personal tank - decked out inside with every comfort.

And he is waiting.....Waiting for what?

Well - you see, although he keeps the terrorist flare ups of the world going - he deeply wishes for only one thing.... World War Three. His every ambition - every move he makes is directed to bringing that about. Because - he theorises that the two great powers will wipe each other out - the world will be laid waste. But - HIS army - protected in radiation proof bunkers, will wait, watch - and then emerge... and, small (by comparison) though it is - it will make up for size in sheer quality. With such an army a man could take over whatever remains of the world....

This then is our villain's supreme motive. This is the villain Bond will be pitted against.

The way into the story....?

Newsreels showing terrorist actions all over the world - but with always the same face appearing. The face of our villain's most trusted observer.

H.M.Government are concerned by this factor - allied to a report that trouble is brewing in what has always been a completely untroubled area.

Bond is given the mission to find out why.

We finally got some tank action in *GoldenEye*.

WHO WILL HE BE PITTED AGAINST?

In ascending order:

The trusted observer.
Members of the villain's crack army – a murder squad of utter professionalism.
The villain's personal bodyguard. An ex-Marine now blinded by a land-mine – but who has heightened his other senses (particularly his hearing) to such a degree that his blindness is no longer a handicap. Toss a grenade at him and he will unerringly reach up a hand – catch it – and toss it back at you! Throw a punch and he'll duck it. Put him in a room full of china, and he'll run across it without breaking a single piece!
His weapon is a short swagger stick – painted white – it conceals a short spike, and with it he will go for your eyes. Yes, he always blinds his victim before he kills him!
Bond eventually beats him by blasting sound at him (hi-fi – whatever) – sound that disorientates his uncanny sixth sense.
The villain himself. Bizarre and protected by his army. Living in the varying impregnability of his personal tank or his underground bunkers, etc.

THE GIRLS INVOLVED?

A Russian agent who is approaching the same problem from a different angle.

The villain's favourite girl friend. Favourite because she reminds him of a howitzer shell (when she takes her bra off you can see why!)

The sister of a terrorist leader – now disappeared – she thinks arrested by authority – but actually he is now with the villain's private army.

Several female soldiers – commandos who's looks bely their lethal qualities.

SET PIECES MIGHT INCLUDE:

A chase in tanks.

A fight in the armour room (maybe with Bond in armour?) – Because naturally the villain would have a war museum. This thought might even allow us to have jousting if we wanted!

A duel with bazookas. Or even cannon!

A chase across a very special, (designed to kill if you make a mistake) assault course used for training. Culminating with a run across a mine-field.

Bond in poison gas filled room – fighting masked men who only have to pull HIS mask loose to kill him.

A 'chicken run' game – played with a live grenade with the pin pulled out. Who will be the first to toss it away?!

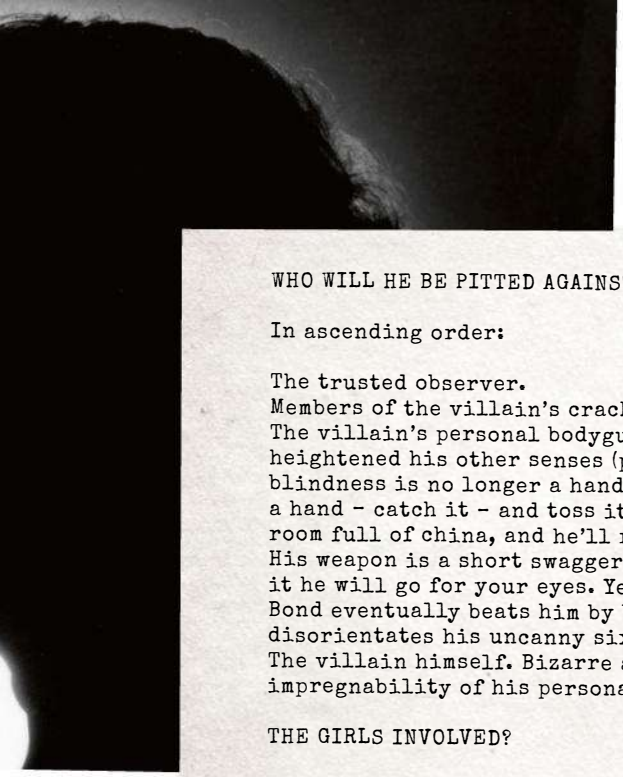
Bond having to make love in a conventional tank (which is very VERY cramped) – and unwittingly starting it up – so that the love manouveres are displayed to the audience by the girations of the tank...because Bond has the steering gear nearly up his arse!

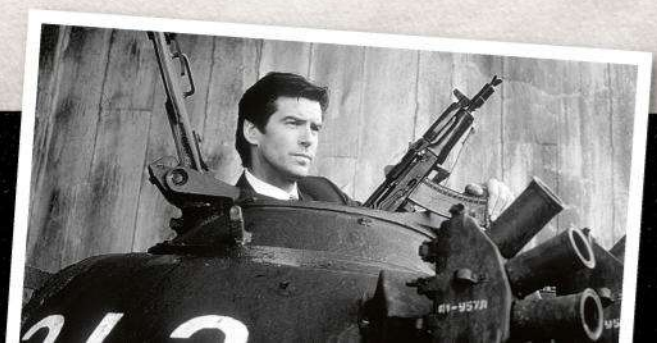
The final escape is when Bond and Girl squeeze into a missile and get it fired..en route to...they know not where? But they end up in the Kremlin! Too wild?

Maybe Bond destroys the villain by flooding the bunkers. "He should have joined the Navy" quips Mr B.

Bond makes love in the map room – huge and automated. "It's your Gibraltar I'm after",as he advances on the girl.

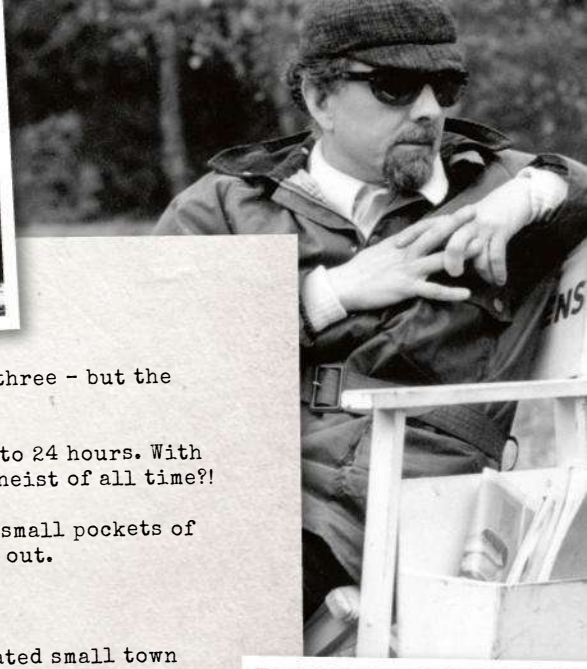
And etc.





PICTURES: EON, DANJAQ, UNITED ARTISTS, CORBIS, SUNSET BOULEVARD, KOBAL, MOVIESTORE, THE LEGACY COLLECTION, THA, BETTMAN, ITV, DIANA WALKER, SHUTTERSTOCK, GETTY, STOCK ART, FOTOGRAPHIK, RELEON8211/GETTY.

The New Avengers' "Sleeper" recycled idea two.



"BOND PROJECT TWO".

The main motive. The biggest heist of all time. Not just one bank - or even three - but the sacking of a whole city!

Imagine if a small army of men could take the whole of say..New York for up to 24 hours. With Jumbo jets standing by to take away the loot...wouldn't that be the biggest heist of all time?!

How do they do it? Maybe by drugging the water supply - which would leave small pockets of non-drinkers to overcome. Or maybe by some kind of gas - this to be worked out.

This is the climax of the picture.

But it starts when the villains have a dummy run on a small town - an isolated small town - just to check that their system is going to work when they tackle the big city.

Should be easy to involve Bond in that kind of caper early on.

The villain's gimmick? A great one (I think). He lives on a small private island in tropical waters. Except that the island keeps disappearing! It is big enough to have houses - and air strip - all facilities - but doesn't appear on any map! BECAUSE: It is a man made island. Actually it is kind of like the deck of the God damnedest biggest air craft carrier you ever saw. The flat deck of a submarine. Which can be submerged - complete with trees, air-strip, etc., when-ever the villain wants to disappear. Nice for Bond to fly over the spot and see a sunken town below. Nicer still for him to be on it when it starts to submerge. And, of course, the location of the 'island' can keep changing!

US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

"BOND PROJECT THREE".

Our villain is the world's greatest spy (not the world's greatest agent - Bond is that) - but spy. He conducts his activities on a grand scale never seen before. Not for him the scurry over the Berlin wall - the sewers of Vienna. No... his spying organisation is only comparable with IBM or ICI!

He is UNpolitical - he steals secrets - and sells to the highest bidder. In fact - a bizarre scene - he actually holds an auction of secrets once a year - where representatives try to outbid each other for secrets of varying importance!

But how does he obtain his secrets? And how does he remain unbetrayed by his aides?

BUT he does. And he has eyes and ears inside the world's tightest security areas.

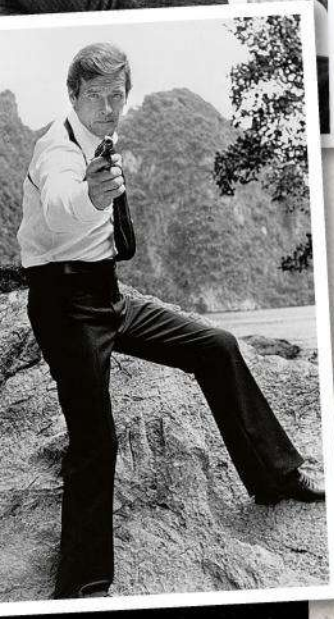
BECAUSE: Knowing he cant bribe or coerse a Kissinger into becoming his man...he has taken him over. Kissinger would disappear for a day or so - and then reappear - and from then on he would belong to the villain!

How? The villain's surgical scientists operate on their victims - maintaining the human exterior - but replacing the interior with her own instruments. The victim becomes a kind of Frankenstein creation - a robot - who can be turned in on the villain's console any moment - tuned in so that all the VICTIM sees and hears is immediately transmitted to base!

Gradually too - the villain has replaced his own aides with automatons - who behave and react and feel like real human beings - but are actually a kind of robot.

Great stuff for Bond - when a girl 'breaks down' in his arms - how do you make love to a robot. And then there are bugs in them - bugs not yet completely ironed out - and sometimes they go wrong. Run down - go too fast - behave strangely.

It is this kind of behaviour in a Minister of the Crown that puts Bond on the trail up front. But the trail he follows is deliberate...a trap..because the man they most want to make a robot of..is Bond!



"BOND PROJECT FOUR".

It happens by accident - a scientist - and his two very pretty daughters, live in some remote spot of the world.

The scientist - pursuing some other course of research stumbles upon the worst possible weapon in the world....it creates a kind of zone of silence. The Great Powers rely entirely on their early warning systems. This device could negate them - whoever has it could launch an attack against the other - and they wouldn't know until the H-Bomb hit them!

Obviously representatives of the world's great powers are trying to track the scientist to earth - and grab the invention.

But ahead of the game are Spectre. And right on their heels is Bond.

The scientist - realising the value of his invention - has other ideas. He wants to hide out - and blackmail the Powers to disarm. He sees his new toy as the ultimate weapon of peace..but he hasn't reckoned with Spectre.

This one is a chase - where-ever you want.

"BOND PROJECT FIVE"

Spectre have developed the ultimate in "shake-downs" - literally!

They have perfected a device, based on sonic sound, which can, by sonic vibration, reduce the door of a vault to iron filings in a few minutes! It could bring down the Empire State Building in ten.

But - when the device (and maybe it's inventor) are en route to present it to Spectre...the plane is hi-jacked by young terrorists - and they now have this lethal weapon.

Bond - oddly enough - finds himself working alongside Spectre in an attempt to find the weapon before the terrorists realise its potential (which they do) - and turn it against some of the cities of the world.

"BOND PROJECT SIX".

A drug that reverses character. It can make a lion like a lamb - and turn a rabbit into a killer!

In larger doses it makes the human violently aggressive. Larger doses of the antidote can turn fighting men into craven hearted, gentle people.

This is just the main hook for a Bond story. The 'gizmo' behind the story.

"BOND PROJECT SEVEN".

A tranquil, moonlit tropical sea. A small motor yacht, making an early start for some Tuna fishing, sleeks along. The crew number no more than four. Then suddenly, out of the night looms a tall dark shape. It is a liner like the Queen Mary - but unlit, unpowered, drifting!

The biys from the yacht manage to get on board - and find themselves in a derlict like the "Marie Celeste" - except that THIS ship once had 3,000 people on board. Now there is nobody! But no signs of disaster - the staterooms untouched - the dining rooms laid up for dinner. The bridge is empty too.

Then suddenly the yacht boys are cut down by masked machine gunners.

And later the same liner docks at some big port - and those 3,000 missing people disembark!

What has happened..? Well, a big liner is a floating town. It is also, once at sea, quite vulnerable - take over the radio, and who knows what is going on?! Someone like Spectre did just this - took the passengers ashore to an island base - worked on them - and put them back. None of the passengers remember the interruption..yet. But, and this is where Bond comes in - first one - then another passengers starts to to have vague recollections of something strange that happened on the luxury cruise.

The passengers and crew have been taken over in some way by Spectre. They will now, the cruise over, go their separate ways - but Spectre keeps tabs on all of them - each keyed for a special, nefarious purpose. 3,000 potentail assassins - robbers - spies - informers..?

A good opening that might well develop.

"YOU'RE SO COOL, BREWSTER!"

FORTY YEARS ON FROM ITS RELEASE, WRITER-DIRECTOR TOM HOLLAND REVEALS HOW FRIGHT NIGHT HELPED REVIVE THE VAMPIRE FILM

WORDS: **OLIVER PFEIFFER**

BLENDING HORROR-COMEDY WITH HITCHCOCKIAN intrigue, *Fright Night* follows "Peeping Tom" Charley Brewster (William Ragsdale), a teenage horror movie fan who becomes convinced that his charming new neighbour is a vampire. It opens with a voyeuristic, self-aware sequence that tilts down from a full moon, sweeps across a suburban street, and into Brewster's bedroom, where he's making out with his girlfriend as a cheesy horror movie plays. However, he soon becomes distracted by something he sees through his window.

"I told them If you want to get closer to Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, you need to modernise it; it has to have a kid look out the window and see a vampire in the house next door, and Universal [Studios] threw me out!" writer/director Tom Holland tells *SFX*. "They thought the idea was so ridiculous. At that time, vampires were associated with failure, which is to say dead literally! You had George Hamilton in *Love At First Bite*, which was a farce of vampires, and when they do a farce, you know that the concept has been exhausted."

COLUMBIA PICTURES/SUNSET BOULEVARD/CORBIS VIA GETTY

Amy (Amanda Bearse) comes over all *Evil Dead*.

"I ended up with the top effects people in Hollywood at that moment"

With no one believing his claims that his new neighbour is a vampire, Charley turns to hammy horror TV host, actor and self-proclaimed "vampire killer" Peter Vincent for help. "I grew up in an era where the only place you could really see horror films once they'd come out in the theatres was on the late-night channel, 'The Friday Night Frights'," he continues.

"They always had a corny host like Vampira, with tacky sets falling apart, but it was all a lot of fun. That's when I asked myself, 'If I were a horror movie fan convinced that my neighbour was a vampire, who would I turn to for help?'"

Planet Of The Apes star Roddy McDowall immortalised Peter Vincent, though the role was written – hence the name – for horror legend Vincent Price. "I found out that Vincent's health wasn't the best, and then Roddy came in and played the hell out of it," recalls Holland. "I wrote it with a sense of humour, and he knew how to deliver that!

"I threw a bit of *Abbott And Costello Meets Frankenstein* in there, too. Peter Vincent has the complete hero's journey. Charley is the driving force, but Peter's the one who turns out to be a total fraud, who has lost his courage and then somehow finds it again at the last moment.

"After *Fright Night* became a success, Roddy invited me to his house, and there was Vincent Price with his wife – it was wonderful," Holland continues. "But I wanted to talk about horror movies, and all he wanted to discuss was art and haute cuisine! He was a gourmet and had even published a book on modern art. He had no interest in talking about horror movies!"

PRINCE OF DARKNESS

Chris Sarandon plays the dashing, bloodsucking neighbour, Jerry Dandrige, who seduces Charley's girlfriend, Amy (Amanda Bearse), due to her eerie resemblance to his long-lost love. The story unfolds with echoes of a classic Dracula tale, as the immortal predator pulls her into his deadly embrace. It's the timeless tale of an older, more powerful rival stealing away a younger man's love.

"Charley is sexually jealous of him," explains Holland. "The first moment when Jerry comes down the stairwell and bends down and kisses Amy on her hand, I cut to Charley, and you see he's as jealous as hell."

However, the film is also known for its homoerotic undertones, particularly a seduction-like encounter between Charley's quirky friend "Evil" Ed Thompson (Stephen Geoffreys) and the prince of darkness. "I layered in that moment with Evil Ed and Jerry Dandrige in the alleyway, where Jerry says, 'Take my hand, and you'll never be bullied again!' That is the older man and the younger boy in a sense."

Decades before Robert Eggers's *Nosferatu*, *Fright Night* paid its own tribute to FW Murnau's indelible silent classic, with Dandrige's unnervingly elongated claw-like fingers resembling the gnarled hands of the terrifying Count Orlok, and an encased Nosferatu mask glimpsed in Vincent's apartment. *Fright Night* also takes a dig at the '80s slasher films that were popular at the time, with Vincent venting his frustration to Charley that all his generation cares about now are "demented madmen running around in ski masks hacking up young virgins – *not* vampires!"

"I'm sure there were people at the time about to see a film called *Fright Night* and expecting to see a slasher movie who were disappointed," continues Holland. "But *Fright Night* has a real story and has become multi-generational; in a way, it's become a gateway film for younger people into classical horror."

Fright Night doesn't just allude to old-school horror. Its virtuoso opening sequence and *Rear Window*-style setup make it clear that the great master of suspense cast a long shadow over the production– no surprise considering that Tom Holland wrote the 1983 sequel to *Psycho*, directed by Hitchcock scholar Richard Franklin.

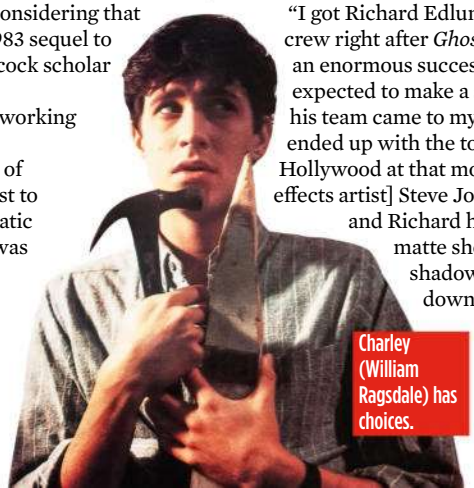
"I learnt so much from working with Richard; he had an encyclopaedic knowledge of Hitchcock and was the first to invite him to USC [Cinematic Arts]. Working with him was like taking a graduate semester in Hitchcock.

Peter Vincent (Roddy McDowall) gets cross.

Then we went on to do *Cloak & Dagger*," he says, referencing the 1984 spy thriller starring Henry Thomas, which he wrote just before his directorial debut.

When it came time to bring *Fright Night*'s supernatural creatures and eerie transformations to life, the success of 1984's *Ghostbusters* helped Tom Holland secure some of the industry's best special effects professionals.

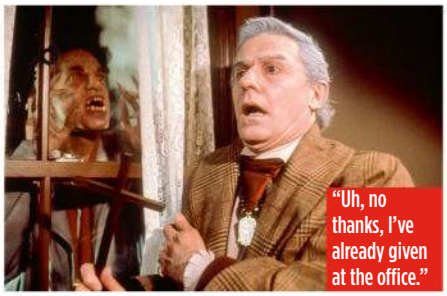
"I got Richard Edlund and his effects crew right after *Ghostbusters*, which was an enormous success. Columbia had expected to make a sequel, but instead, his team came to my little picture. I ended up with the top effects people in Hollywood at that moment. [Special effects artist] Steve Johnson is a genius, and Richard handled the moving matte shots – like the shadow of the bat coming down the wall. Those


Charley (William Ragsdale) has choices.

PICTURES: COLUMBIA PICTURES/SUNSET BOULEVARD/CORBIS VIA GETTY. EVERETT/SHUTTERSTOCK. STOCK IMAGES: FOTOGRAPHIK/GETTY.

Ooh, that's going to sting in the morning.

Chris Sarandon as Jerry Dandrige: suave as hell.


"Uh, no thanks, I've already given at the office."

Evil Ed (Stephen Geoffreys): clue in name.

Jerry: careful, you'll have someone's eye out.

were some of the few effects done with overlays. Everything else was practical and done in-camera – like the transformations, Evil Ed dying, and Billy Cole [Jonathan Stark] melting."

For the filmmaker, *Fright Night* was more than just a horror film; it was a personal project infused with his childhood love for the genre. "It was a love letter to the fans, and that was my youth. It was me, and I'd grown up on Hammer horror films and AIP. I'd grown up with Dracula with Christopher Lee, and that's what I remember. So I'm Charley, in a way."

"It's amazing that we're talking about it 40 years later. That didn't happen back when I was making these films. The movie used to open, succeed or not, and then go to television on syndication, and then they were gone."

While the original has become a cult classic, Holland's opinion on the 2011 remake starring Colin Farrell and Anton Yelchin is less than enthusiastic. Despite the film's solid cast and production values, he feels it missed the mark in capturing the spirit of the original.

"It didn't have any sense of humour, and nothing was titillating or erotic about it, which I did tastefully in the original," says Holland. "When Jerry's sucking Amy's neck and the blood runs down her back, that was very erotic. There was none of that in the remake.

"The script was the problem. The cast was very good, the production value was high, and I thought it was well-directed, but to me, the script was lifeless. When you ask yourself why the original was successful, you need to at least carry those key elements into the remake, but that didn't happen here. It lacked joy, soul and humour."

VINCENT REPRISE

A sequel to Holland's original *Fright Night* arrived in 1988: Tommy Lee Wallace's *Fright Night Part 2*. It reunited Charley Brewster and Peter Vincent as they faced off against Jerry Dandrige's equally dangerous vampire sister, Regine (Julie Carmen). However, due to significant production challenges and the murder of New Century Vista head Jose Menendez by his sons, the film received only a limited theatrical release.

"I was working on *Fatal Beauty*, so I wasn't available," says Holland. "It went ahead with my blessings, but then Gabe Katzka, who had produced my first film, *The Beast Within*, had a heart attack and passed away. They ended up not having enough money to finish the film."

Tom Holland has penned his own follow-up novels, however (co-written with A Jack Ulrich). The 2022 prequel *Fright Night: Origins* also expands on the events of the first film, while its sequel, the forthcoming *Fright Night: Aftermath*, will explain why Evil Ed was teased to return. "The ending of *Fright Night* left you feeling good about our heroes, with that embrace at the end, but then seeing and hearing Ed next door tells you he's back and alive. That's what I'm dealing with in the second book."

Fright Night is available on Prime Video and Blu-ray.

FROM HITCHCOCK TO KING

We explore some of Tom Holland's other horrors

PSYCHO II (1983)

Tom Holland wrote this smart sequel to Hitchcock's iconic psychological horror, set 22 years after the original. The story follows an apparently cured Norman Bates, released from a mental institution, only for the relatives of his victims to attempt to drive him insane. "It was probably the hardest script I've ever worked on. It was very strictly based on the given circumstances of the original — I ensured I didn't violate anything Hitchcock created in *Psycho*."

CHILD'S PLAY (1988)

"I'm your friend till the end!" Holland directed the chilling killer doll classic that launched a franchise spanning six sequels, a remake, and a TV series.

"I changed the doll's name from Buddy to Chucky, because there was a creepy doll named 'My Buddy' which was very popular at the time," Holland told *SFX*. "I gave that doll to the effects guy, Kevin Yeager, and told him to take the face and give it an evil Raggedy Andy colouring, complete with freckles. Ergo Chucky, the killer doll."

THINNER (1996)

Holland adapted this Stephen King body horror about an obese lawyer who rapidly loses weight after being cursed by a gypsy. "I turned down *The Stand* to make *Thinner* because I found it more compelling as a character study," he says. "It wasn't commercially successful but gained a lasting presence. Robert John Burke gave a fantastic performance, but I chose a bitter ending. The film tested well until the final minutes, but the audience hated seeing Billy lose! So I shot an alternate ending where he gets his revenge."

MOVIESTORE/SHUTTERSTOCK, UNITED ARTISTS/GETTY, BRUCE BIRMELIN/SPELLING INTERNATIONAL/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK.

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

HOLLY RACE

Battle royal: the British novelist tells us how she overcame setbacks

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Alex Beckett

WHEN HOLLY RACE FIRST PITCHED an early version of *Six Wild Crowns*, her remarkable fantasy that radically re-imagines the court of Henry VIII, it was as a YA project. In the wake of the comparative failure of her debut trilogy, this was a low point in her writing career. Worse was to follow, as she was dropped by her agent. Sometimes, though, things turn around. As she reframed the book as an adult project, she refused to quit and, having long been fascinated by the Tudor era, instead got to work on a novel she knew she needed to write. "Some of my friends describe *Six Wild Crowns* as my revenge book, which feels a bit petty," Race laughs, "but I think they're probably right."

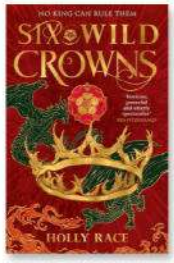
The key to unlocking the era was to put Henry's wives at the centre of the narrative and to imagine how they might have related to each other. What if Henry wasn't a murderous serial monogamist, but a polygamist whose wives lived in different homes? This idea forced Race to reexamine her own attitudes to the women. "I really did grow up thinking Anne Boleyn was the bee's knees," she says. "Jane Seymour, yuck, what a bitch! And I think with most people who have an interest in the Tudors, we all have our favourites. I've got a friend who adores Catherine of Aragon and goes to visit her tomb in Peterborough and puts flowers on it – and I totally get it."

As she researched the book, Race had to face the idea that there was an "internalised misogyny" in her attitude towards Seymour. She's a woman who comes down through history as the good girl, the dutiful one who tragically died after giving birth to the male heir her husband craved.

OLD WIVES' TALE

There's something inherently sexist in this portrayal, we suggest. "That's a really good point," agrees Race, "and there is a real lack of evidence around what she was like, what she did. What we do know is she had a real nous for – and this is going to sound very dry – bookkeeping, estate management. She was very sensible when it came to what her ladies were allowed to wear – and what she got to wear differently from them to make everyone realise she was a queen."

In writing *Six Wild Crowns*, Race not only confronted her own attitudes towards the real-life Henry's third wife but, in making Seymour a POV character (along with Boleyn; future novels will show the world from the perspective of the other women), put a lot of herself into the character. Seymour has "imposter syndrome". She's also gay. At her all-girls' school, Race says, she was "outed". It was an awful experience. "They called me a lesbian," she remembers.



BIODATA

From
Cambridge

Greatest Hits
Race's first YA trilogy was an urban fantasy: *Midnight's Twins*, *A Gathering Midnight* and *A Midnight Dark And Golden*.

Random Fact
When she was a television script editor, the shows Race worked on included *Death In Paradise*.

"I'm actually bisexual, I realise now, but at the time I didn't have that word in my vocabulary." She immediately "got back in the closet" and, she adds, it took years for her to get out again.

As for Henry, Race's reading shows him as spoiled and entitled, yet also trapped by circumstances – as the real-life Henry VIII was as a younger son suddenly thrust into the spotlight by the death of his elder brother, Arthur. "[You grow up thinking] I can marry for love and then suddenly you're the heir and you have a responsibility to your kingdom," she says. Which is not to excuse Henry. Like the real-life Henry VIII, Race's Henry comes across as a man who likes "the idea of being in love", which isn't the same as being "truly capable of love".

Perhaps he will eventually be redeemed. We'll certainly find out, because *Six Wild Crowns* is being given a big push by publisher Orbit.

LET THEM EAT CAKE

The way Race tells it, her younger self would be very surprised by this. While she loved writing stories, she never expected to be an author. She had an "unremarkable" if quite "privileged" childhood in rural Cambridgeshire, surrounded by animals. Her mother was a journalist. For "a good part" of her childhood, her father was a stay-at-home dad, a choice that sometimes brought "sneering remarks".

She studied English at university and thought she wanted to be "the first female director of the National Theatre". She got involved in theatre partly as a way to gain confidence after being bullied. "Then I began to realise that I actually get really anxious when telling people what to do," she remembers.

Instead, she moved into television, working as a script editor for production companies. This included moving to Bristol because of the presence of Aardman, where "I kind of rocked up in their offices and was like, 'I have cupcakes! Can I help with anything?' Until they gave me a job just to shut me up."

Her shift to writing novels came after she was made redundant and then, a couple of months later, discovered she was pregnant. Her husband suggested she finish the book she'd been working on for 10 years – which is how she came to write her YA trilogy, about which she still has "mixed feelings".

No matter. After a false start, her literary career is beginning to flourish in a future born of a fascination with the past.

Six Wild Crowns is out now, published by Orbit.

> “Some of my friends describe Six Wild Crowns as my revenge book”

Subscribe to SFX

...and get all these benefits

• Never miss an issue! • No more traipsing to the shops in the rain – have the mag delivered to your door! • Pay significantly less than the shop price • Print subscribers also get a digital issue • Free access to a huge library of digital back issues* • The satisfaction of knowing you're helping to keep the editorial team off the streets!

See page 25 for our latest special offer and full terms and conditions. *Issues dating back to *SFX* 189 (December 2009) are available on the *SFX* magazine app; issues dating back to *SFX* 227 (November 2012) via the Pocketmags app.

JULY 2025

Reviews

edited by Ian Berriman

CINEMA 72 | TV 75 | HOME ENTERTAINMENT 76 | BOOKS 82 | COMICS 90 | GAMES & STUFF 92

THIS ISSUE
54
REVIEWS

72

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON

A real Berk

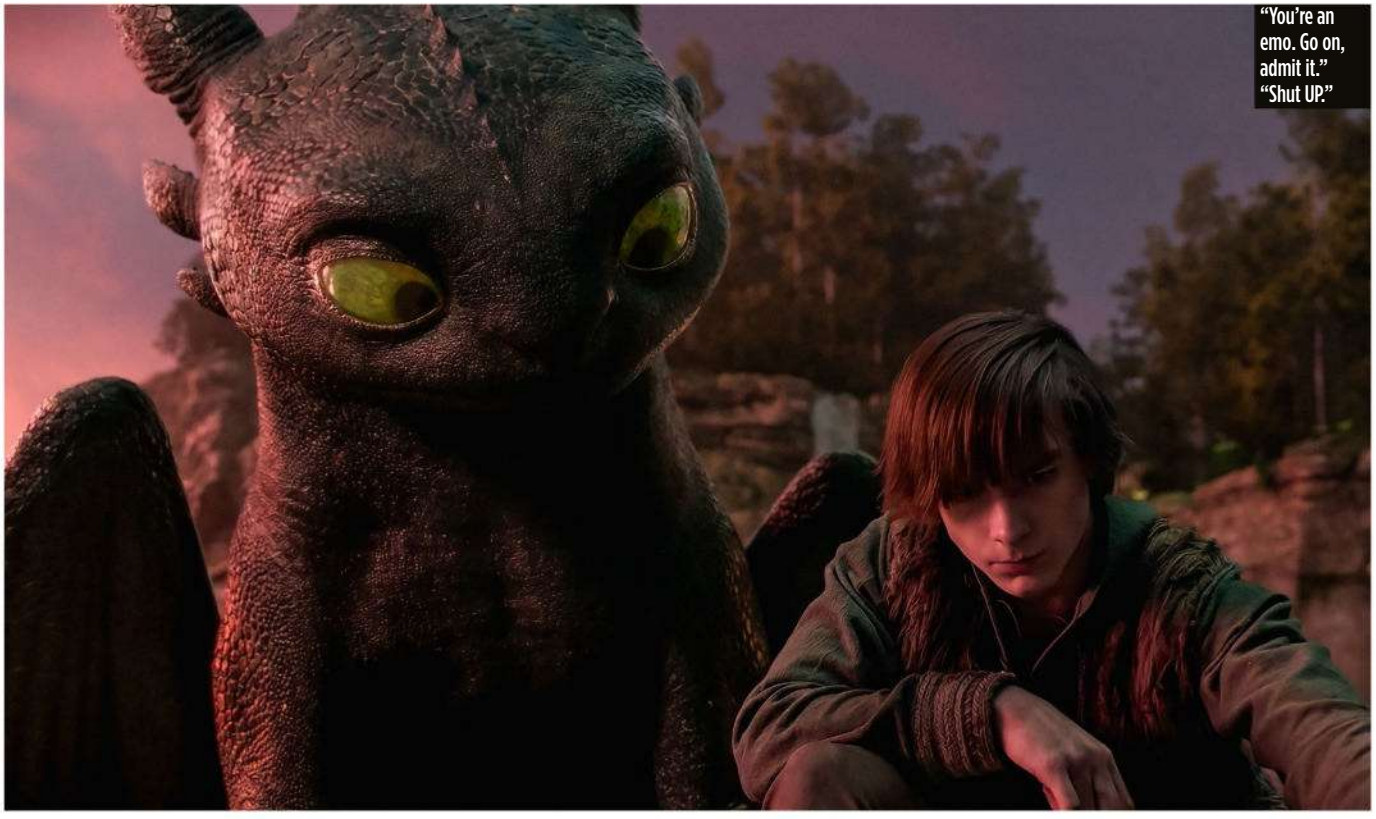
Highlights

75
DOCTOR WHO
→ Belinda joins, the Rani returns, and Ncuti regenerates – our verdict on the second Disney+ series.

76
PREDATOR: KILLER OF KILLERS
→ An animated amuse-bouche before *Predator: Badlands*.

82
BURY OUR BONES IN THE MIDNIGHT SOIL
→ VE Schwab's new novel is a tale of three female vampires.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED ★★★★★ SUPERB ★★★★☆ GOOD ★★★☆☆ AVERAGE ★★☆☆☆ POOR ★☆☆☆☆ TERRIBLE



"You're an emo. Go on, admit it." "Shut UP."

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON

Friends in high places

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

PG | 125 minutes

Director **Dean DeBlois**

Cast **Mason Thames, Nico Parker, Gerard Butler, Nick Frost**

When first released in 2010, *How To Train Your Dragon* signified a marked step up in quality and ambition for a DreamWorks Animation outfit overly dependent on its *Shrek*, *Madagascar* and *Kung Fu Panda* franchises. Its 2014 sequel was even better: so good, in fact, that the relative disappointment of 2019 closer *The Hidden World* did little to tarnish its memory.

It was inevitable, then, that writer/director Dean DeBlois would revisit the series at some point, especially given Disney's recent successes in the live-action make-over department. Should anyone be anticipating a radical reinvention, however, they should be immediately disabused of that fanciful notion.

The "new" *How To Train Your Dragon* comes squarely from the "if it ain't broke..." school of adaptation, with a scene-for-scene, beat-for-beat approach that the Mouse House has largely (and maybe foolhardily) eschewed. Its chief pleasures derive from the crowd-pleasing fan service it delivers: the thrill of seeing Gerard Butler physically incarnate Viking leader Stoick the Vast, for example, or the curiosity factor of seeing the cat-eyed dragon Toothless rendered in three-dimensional form.

The Butler gambit works a treat, the Scottish actor lending muscular heft, dramatic gravitas and even the occasional headbutt to his old voice role. Where Toothless is concerned, alas, this *How To* reboot comes up short.

DeBlois's legion of computer boffins are proficient enough to make him dynamic in flight, granting the scenes in which his human ally Hiccup (Mason Thames) gets him airborne again a visceral and propulsive charge.

In the moments where he and Hiccup interact at ground level, however, there's none of the playfulness and mischief of his animated counterpart, resulting in a character of limited appeal that is not so much Toothless as soulless.

Thames, for his part, makes a good fist of mirroring Jay Baruchel's diffident vocal stylings in his role as a hapless Viking ill at ease with the dragon-slaughtering onus that comes with being the chief's only son. He also strikes up a winning rapport with Nico Parker's Astrid, in a Berk that's noticeably more diverse and multicultural than the embattled village we saw in the original.

Craggy coastal scenery, largely captured in the Faroe Islands, lends the film an epic sweep that's deftly enhanced by John Powell's stirring score. And there's little to find fault with in the film's contingent of supporting beasties, with special mention going to one scaly monster that can set itself on fire.

Despite running a good 20 minutes longer than its 2010 inspiration, the 2025 version rarely drags, and builds to an impressive climax at a dragons' nest lorded over by a Godzilla-sized titan. When it comes to the central relationship, though, it is sadly a lesson in how to drain a dragon of its personality. **Neil Smith**

i Mason Thames grew up watching the *How To Train Your Dragon* films, and even dressed up as Hiccup for Halloween.

THE RITUAL

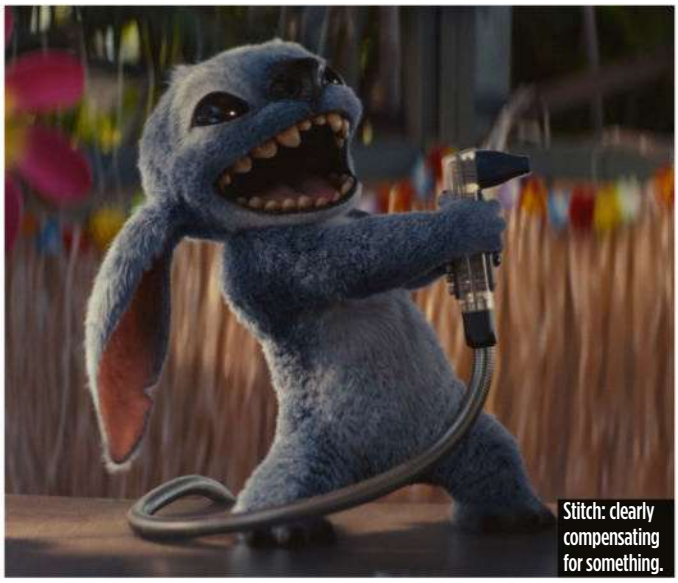
★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 98 minutes
Director **David Midell**
Cast **Al Pacino, Dan Stevens, Ashley Greene, Abigail Cowen**

"Expect the unexpected!" rasps veteran cleric Father Riesinger (Al Pacino) at the beginning of this ostensibly authentic recreation of a real-life exorcism that took place in Iowa in 1928. That nothing remotely unexpected subsequently occurs in this *The Exorcist*-indebted chiller won't surprise anyone, though that doesn't prevent it supplying the occasional jump scare.

A young woman (Abigail Cowen) is exhibiting behaviour odd enough to get the Catholic Church involved, with lowly parish priest Father Steiger (Dan Stevens) selected to be note-taker in chief. It's his observations that provide the basis for the Satanic bunkum that follows, with Pacino's readings of scripture over the girl's initially unfettered body evoking a litany of bestial howls, vomitous emissions and the kind of diabolical trash-talk we heard from Linda Blair's potty-mouthed Regan.

Cowen's Emma Schmidt can also turn violent, ripping hair from the scalp of one unwary sister and crushing the hand of another. Steiger is convinced she's more psychologically than spiritually troubled, putting him at odds with Pacino's hardcore old-timer. "I don't know what I'm doing!" Stevens admits during one crisis of faith. That's not an accusation that can be levelled against director David Midell, even if what he's doing has been (over)done before. **Neil Smith**



Stitch: clearly compensating for something.

LILO & STITCH

Can't Help Falling In Love

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
U | 108 minutes
Director **Dean Fleischer Camp**
Cast **Maia Kealoha, Sydney Agudong, Billy Magnussen, Zach Galifianakis**

Shockingly, it's been a whopping 23 years since the original *Lilo & Stitch* hit cinemas. Despite being a modest hit at the time, it never quite reached the mainstream recognisability of some of Disney's other animated franchises, but it also never went away. Direct-to-video sequels and TV shows kept the kiddies hooked, while the sheer cuddliness of little alien Stitch did not go unnoticed by Disney's merchandising heads. And so here we are in 2025, welcoming a live-action remake of the original movie and an avalanche of blue cuddly toys to go with it.

The good news is that rather than being solely a cynical cash-grab, it's also rather wonderful, centred on an *astonishing* performance by eight-year-old Maia Kealoha as Lilo. Bright as a button, she's the perfect foil for alien fugitive Stitch (voiced by Chris Sanders), a chaotic science experiment being hunted across space by his creator Dr Jumba Jookiba (Zach Galifianakis). Stitch hides out in Hawaii alongside Lilo and her big sister Nani (Sydney Agudong), learns to love Elvis, causes destruction everywhere he goes and, eventually, melts hearts.

> **"She's the perfect foil for alien fugitive Stitch"**

There are a few minor changes to the plot – original bad guy Gantu has been dumped, for example – but there's more than enough here to keep things zipping along to a jolly Elvis-packed soundtrack.

Our only criticism is a minor one: while the CG Stitch interacts perfectly with the real world around him, other alien characters feel somewhat two-dimensional and out of place. A new generation of Stitch-loving sprogs won't care about that, though. **Jayne Nelson**

i A deleted subplot in the 2002 film made Stitch a crime lord, with one of his gang members voiced by Ricardo Montalban.

FINAL DESTINATION BLOODLINES

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 110 minutes
Directors **Adam B Stein, Zach Lipovsky**
Cast **Kaitlyn Santa Juana, Teo Briones, Richard Harmon, Tony Todd, Brec Bassinger**

Fourteen years on from its fifth chapter, the *Final Destination* franchise returns with at least one new kink to the formula: the notion that even the unborn can find themselves on the Grim Reaper's hit list, should anyone intuitive enough to dodge his scythe happen to be pregnant. Having escaped a fiery demise in a collapsing Space Needle-like structure in this reboot's '60s-set prelude, the cost of survival for Iris (Brec Bassinger) is to have her progeny stalked by Death: a generational curse that catches up with granddaughter Stefani (Kaitlyn Santa Juana) and the rest of her extended family.

The elaborate expirations that follow supply the usual quota of gore, with everything from a garbage truck to a nose ring ingeniously transformed into a lethal agent of mortality. Though a swan song from the late Tony Todd briefly touches, the film has a blandly anonymous feel unwittingly reflected by its roster of interchangeable day players.

"It's never too late for a second chance!" observes one character before falling foul to a runaway lawn mower. The *Final Destination* franchise might not be in the last chance saloon yet, but there are surely only so many times it can be resuscitated. **Neil Smith**

THE SHROUDS

State Of Decay

★★★★☆

RELEASED 4 JULY

18 | 119 minutes

Director **David Cronenberg**

Cast **Vincent Cassel, Diane Kruger, Guy Pearce, Sandrine Holt**

"How dark are you willing to go?" asks the protagonist of *The Shrouds*, in an early scene. The question should probably be posed to anyone in line for tickets to David Cronenberg's latest.

Though the father (grandad?) of the body horror subgenre is now 82 years old, he's showing no signs of mellowing when it comes to which dark corners he's willing to explore. *The Shrouds* – like *Crimes Of The Future* before it – reassures us that the Cronenberg of 2025 has fundamentally the same concerns as he did in the late–'70s. This is Cronenberg at his most Cronenbergian, poking at taboos like a surgeon probing an open wound.

The sore point this time is grief – a subject Cronenberg knows all about, having lost his wife to cancer eight years ago. The eyebrow-raising central conceit: a technological shroud which generates a 3D image of any body buried in it, allowing a none more morbid form of voyeurism.

You may find yourself wondering whether "GraveTech" echoes intrusive thoughts which Cronenberg himself suffered. There's also a temptation to read the system's inventor, Karsh (Vincent Cassel, whose restrained performance contributes significantly to the film's air of languid detachment) as a stand-in for the director. Hey, they've got similar hairstyles! Though such impulses are best repressed.

Cinemagoers who like to see narratives neatly tied up in a bow are liable to leave *The Shrouds* muttering darkly. While the plot is set up as – in Karsh's words – "a classic detective puzzle" (the mystery being: who vandalised his late wife's grave?) the further it proceeds, the more the impossibility of definitive answers seems to be the point. Everyone from eco-terrorists and a missing oncologist to Russian hackers are in the frame. Explanations are quickly contradicted, causing interpretive whiplash.

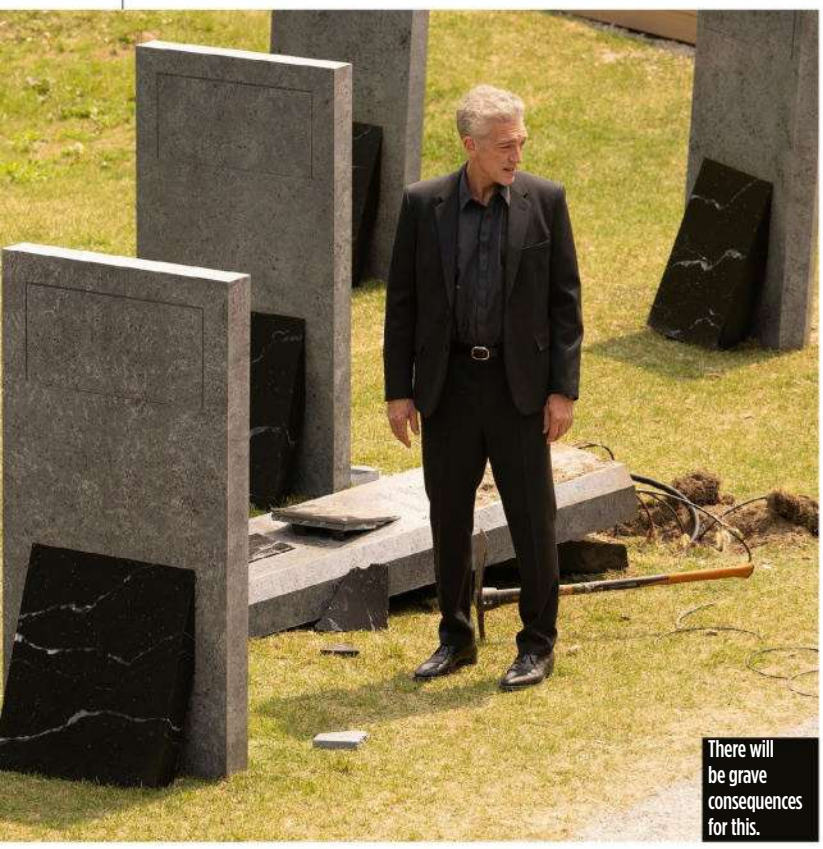
At various points, we acquire new information via the camera locking onto a mobile phone in a character's hand. Such moments are jarringly uncinematic, and remind the viewer that this is the way we now consume "truth". If part of your motivation for going to the pictures is to escape the swamp of disinformation in which we now wade, *The Shrouds* offers no respite.

The film's most winding gut punches come in Karsh's morbid dreams of his dead wife, who visits him naked – and incomplete, a breast and a hand surgically removed. At one point they spoon, only for this tender moment to result in a broken bone.

There's a vein of Vantablack farce running through *The Shrouds*, and it's not difficult to map connections to Cronenberg's *Crash* – or even 1975's *Shivers*, with its speech declaring that "Even dying is an act of eroticism." Few directors would venture into such territory; even fewer would dare you to laugh.

It's a confounding, haunting, mordantly humorous film, which – if it resonates on your particular strange frequency – may linger in the mind for days afterwards.

Ian Berriman



There will be grave consequences for this.

> **"Poking at taboos like a surgeon probing an open wound"**

Léa Seydoux was originally set to play Karsh's wife, but dropped out, explaining later that she "wanted to have a break".

PROTEIN

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

18 | 97 minutes

Director **Tony Burke**

Cast **Craig Russell, Kezia Burrows, Steve Meo, Kai Owen**

This Welsh serial killer thriller is a smart and unexpectedly funny portrait of small town violence, given a mondo twist.

Sion (Craig Russell) is a traumatised veteran of Afghanistan. Homeless and hungry, he starts doing cash-in-hand work for hard-working Katrina (Kezia Burrows) at a run-down gym. Witnessing one of the many awful blokes there threatening her, however, leads Sion to take some fairly drastic action: he kills and eats him.

"Gym bro cannibal chows down on other, more awful, gym bros for the protein" is a great idea for a horror movie, but Tony Burke's debut feature doesn't fully lean into the inherent outréness of the premise, instead opting for a grimy and more grounded tone, resulting in a film that's more like Shane Meadows's classic *Dead Man's Shoes*.

As Sion works his way through the criminal population, the gaggle of two-bit gangsters immediately assume a turf war is in progress and turn on each other. That leads to much of the film's humour, with Steven Meo's useless, put-upon Kevin particularly entertaining.

Spending so much time with so many awful people does grow wearying over the long haul. Still, this is an impressive debut and a solidly gripping thriller that's far more palatable than expected. **Will Salmon**

"Tonight, Matthew, I'm going to be [REDACTED]."

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- **Belinda snaps, "Doctor, you've got to get me home!"**
- **Mrs Flood shows up and says something cryptic.**
- **A god is involved, somehow.**
- **There's a costume change set to music.**

- **Kate Lethbridge-Stewart and Colonel Ibrahim make eyes at one another.**
- **Belinda's never-seen Dad's awful singing is mentioned.**
- **A classic series character shows up.**

DOCTOR WHO Season Two

SPOILER WARNING!

The Two Ranis

★★★★☆

UK **BBC One/iPlayer, streaming now**
US **Disney+ , streaming now**
Showrunner **Russell T Davies**
Cast **Ncuti Gatwa, Varada Sethu, Millie Gibson, Anita Dobson**

EPISODES 2.01-2.08 **"Get Belinda** home!" That was the rallying cry at the start of Ncuti Gatwa's second and final season. First episode "The Robot Revolution" sets that arc in motion, flinging Varada Sethu's nurse into the far future and pitting her and the Doctor against some gorgeously retro bots and "Bel"'s incel ex. It's a solid opener, and one that immediately positions the reluctant traveller as a different sort of companion: more a Tegan than a Sarah Jane, if you will.

"Lux" is another early high point, as the duo tackle a malevolent cartoon in '50s Florida. Brilliantly realised by effects house Framestore, Mr Ring-A-Ding is a gorgeous evocation of Fleischer Studios' animations, voiced with sinister glee by Alan Cumming. "The Well" is also strong, a moody episode which sees the Doctor and Belinda falling in with a group of marines on a distant world. It's quintessential creepy *Who*, with a striking guest performance from Rose Ayling-Ellis.

Unfortunately, "Lucky Day" starts a trend that continues until the final two-parter: sidelining Belinda. Both the leads have only a minimal presence in the episode, which instead focuses on Ruby (Millie Gibson) as she struggles to adjust to post-TARDIS life. The story lays necessary groundwork for the finale by introducing Jonah Hauer-King's conspiracist Conrad, but it's murkily plotted with a twist that, while surprising, doesn't make a lot of sense.

"The Story & The Engine" is the season's most striking episode. Penned by playwright Inua Ellams, it's slow and stagey, taking place largely in one room, but its layered script reveals more depth with multiple viewings. In a season unusually packed with surprise reveals, a cameo by Jo Martin's Fugitive Doctor is genuinely breathtaking, while the episode's exploration of the Doctor's experience as a black man is joyful and heartwarming.

"*Doctor Who* does *Eurovision* – in space!" may sound toe-curling, but "The Interstellar Song Contest" is a lot of fun. Composer Murray Gold rises to the challenge of creating several original songs (ranging from consciously cheesy to affecting) and the episode reveals an unexpected vindictive streak in the Doctor. But "Interstellar" will chiefly be remembered for two things: a cryptic cameo from Carole Anne Ford as the Doctor's granddaughter Susan, and the final reveal of Mrs Flood's true identity.

Which brings us to "Wish World" and "The Reality War", a berserk two-part finale that crams in renegade Time Lady the Rani and Omega, one of the founders of Gallifrey. The intriguing first episode places the Doctor and co in a repressively heteronormative alternate reality in a story a little reminiscent of *WandaVision*.

"The Reality War" fumbles the end of Belinda's arc badly, though. Ncuti Gatwa gives a fine final performance, and the stinger – it's Billie Piper! – is jawdropping, but it closes this often thrilling, always fascinating, all too short era not with a bang, but a slightly bewildered, "Huh?"

Will Salmon

i The Doctor and Ruby's encounter with the Shreek in "Lucky Day" was teased in *Caged*, a 2024 novel by Una McCormack.

PREDATOR: KILLER OF KILLERS

It bleeds. Can they kill it?

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 18+ | SVOD

Directors **Dan Trachtenberg, Joshua Wassung**

Cast **Lindsay LaVanchy, Louis Ozawa, Rick Gonzalez, Michael Biehn**

DISNEY+ **Until *Prey* landed in** 2022, the *Predator* franchise had been caught in a downward spiral ever since Arnold Schwarzenegger claimed victory for the human race in the original 1987 movie. The Predators' subsequent face-offs with xenomorphs in the two *Alien vs Predator* films were particularly undeserving of a place in the trophy cabinet.

But the direct-to-streaming story of a young Comanche woman having a close encounter in 18th century America brought a fresh transfusion of luminous green blood to the saga. *Prey* also marked out its director, Dan Trachtenberg, as the ideal candidate to shepherd the species into a whole new era, and later this year his live-action *Predator: Badlands* will set its sights on the big screen. In the meantime he's found time to co-direct this animated anthology film.

Killer Of Killers takes the basic premise of *Prey* – pitting a warrior from Earth history against a Yautja (aka Predator) – and repeats it three times. In "The Shield" (set in 9th century Scandinavia), Viking warrior queen Ursa (Lindsay LaVanchy) goes to war on the ice to protect her son from both rival factions and an unwanted extraterrestrial guest. "The Sword" shifts the focus to 17th century Japan, where silent assassin Kenji (Louis Ozawa) has to deal with a Predator of his own while exorcising some family demons. Finally, "The Bullet" drops a Predator into the Second World War for a fighter-plane dogfight over the North Atlantic.

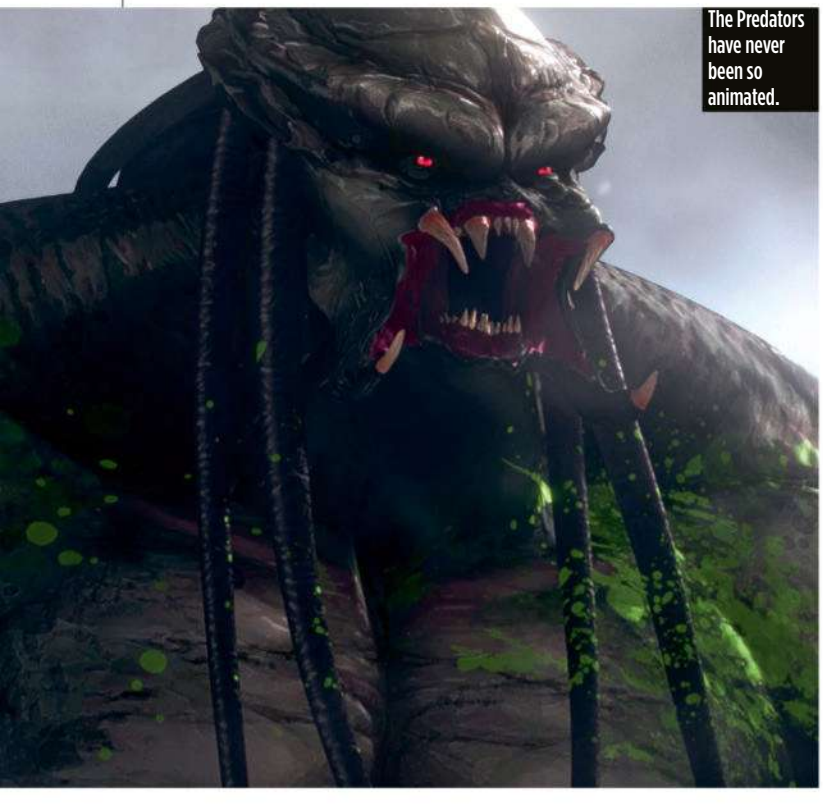
There's an impressive efficiency to the storytelling, which keeps dialogue to a minimum as the vignettes unfold as violent short movies – the copious amounts of blood, guts and severed limbs ensure that *Killer Of Killers* isn't for the squeamish. Meanwhile, the effective use of familiar Predator sound effects means you never forget which sci-fi universe you're in, even though the medium is unfamiliar.

But with each individual skirmish limited to around 20 minutes, the three lead characters feel underdeveloped, less relatable people than collections of beautifully choreographed fight moves. The connective tissue between the stories also feels minimal, despite efforts to tie everything together with a predictable backstory that feels like an afterthought.

Killer Of Killers' biggest flaw, however, is its failure to bring anything new to the party. Sure, each Predator has its own arsenal to call on, and the different backdrops – particularly the aerial battles seen in "The Bullet" – mix things up visually. But this film implies that a species of technologically advanced hunters has learned so little over repeated visits to Earth that they still can't help being defeated by hopelessly outgunned humans. Do they have any of that mystique left?

Reports suggest that the upcoming *Badlands* will mess around with the formula by telling its story from a Predator's point of view. That's exactly what this franchise needs, because human-vs-Yautja one-on-ones have run their course.

Richard Edwards



The Predators have never been so animated.

Killer Of Killers is the first animated movie from Hollywood pre-visualisation specialists The Third Floor.

FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★☆☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1974 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Kevin Connor**

Cast **Peter Cushing, David Warner, Ian Bannen, Ian Carmichael**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **"Never fiddle an** antiques dealer" is the lesson of this horror anthology – the last of seven made by British studio Amicus. The directorial debut of Kevin Connor, who went on to regularly wrangle Doug McClure, it's an enjoyable affair, thanks to a cast of dependable character actors, a varying tone, and its snapshot of '70s Britain – all chintz, kipper ties, and sausage and beans for tea.

The four principal parts adapt stories by R Chetwynd-Hayes. A flat-capped Peter Cushing provides the glue as a shopkeeper who brings down doom on cheating customers.

A tale of a haunted mirror which pushes its latest owner (David Warner) to murder is the grimmest; a segment in which a man plagued by an elemental (Ian Carmichael) calls in a dotty psychic the most comedic. There's a veritable procession of Ians, with Bannen plotting to murder his nagging wife (and falling foul of a twist that's pure EC Comics) and Ogilvy urgent as a hipster who fits an antique door, only to find – via neat practical trickery – that it opens onto a warlock's "ghost room".

None of these yarns outstays its welcome, with only an epilogue that reveals the fate of an armed robber letting things down, feeling rather abrupt after an extended build-up.

Extras A trailer. Warner Archive Collection, you are spoiling us... **Ian Berriman**

THE BLACK TORMENT

Double trouble

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 23 JUNE
1964 | 12 | Blu-ray/DVD
Director **Robert Hartford-Davis**
Cast **John Turner, Heather Sears, Ann Lynn, Peter Arne**

While the set-up may superficially resemble a Hammer production, this tale of strange goings-on at a Regency stately home has more in common with Italian gothic – and is more of a melodrama/mystery (with dashes of *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre*) than an out-and-out horror. There's no blood splashed about here, just a couple of discreet stranglings.

John Turner plays the aristocrat who returns home with his new bride, to be met with suspicion. In his absence, a young woman was raped and murdered, and despite being 100 miles away at the time, he's in the frame. Further complicating matters are visitations by a veiled figure who may be the ghost of his first wife.

You'll pretty soon come to the conclusion that there's a human conspiracy at work, but at least there are several options to consider en route to what is a rather convoluted reveal. Extensive use of location filming adds a touch of class. And a sequence where Sir Richard returns home to find that a servant is – gasp – *already speaking to him in an adjacent room* is charged with palpable tension.

It's still not a patch on Mario Bava, mind.

> **There's no blood here, just a couple of discreet stranglings**

"Looook at my booooks. Do you... desire them?"

Extras This 88 Films edition boasts two conversational critical commentaries: one by Troy Howarth, the other pairing Kim Newman and Stephen Jones. Both are entertaining, though unsurprisingly they cover a lot of the same ground.

A 31-minute piece interviews supporting actors Annette Whiteley and Roger Croucher; the former is good value, revealing that she was originally lined up to play a female killer in a rather different film. Eight minutes of chat with the second assistant editor proves utterly redundant; sometimes, people have such a minor contribution that it's really not worth bothering... Plus: gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i Edina Ronay, who played the young woman who's murdered at the very start, is the daughter of food critic Egon Ronay.

TOURIST TRAP

The Plastic Depopulation

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 7 JULY
1979 | 15 | Blu-ray
Director **David Schmoeller**
Cast **Chuck Connors, Jocelyn Jones, Jon Van Ness, Robin Sherwood**

The work of a first-timer who'd studied under avant-garde filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, *Tourist Trap* takes a surrealist approach to familiar horror tropes.

The set-up screams "slasher", following five friends out in the sticks. After one meets a sticky end looking for gas, the others seek help at Slausen's Lost Oasis, a closed-down tourist attraction featuring animated waxworks of General Custer and the like. As its lonely owner, Chuck Connors walks the line well between sinister and sympathetic.

There are various echoes of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (including a killer in a doll-like mask), but this is a film with its own distinct identity. Few horrors have a firmer grasp of the uncanny; as our hapless heroes wander rooms crowded with mannequins which flap their jaws or turn their eyes, it's seriously eerie. And in the final stages the line between reality and nightmare, animate and inanimate, is completely erased, with the film slipping into all-out madness.

Juxtapose all this with an elegant, romantic score by Pino Donaggio (best known for his work on *Carrie* and *Don't Look Now*), and you have a slice of bewilderingly creepy, unpredictable pop surrealism.

Extras First things first: last time *Tourist Trap* got a UK Blu-ray release, an acrimonious row erupted after it emerged that the cut was five minutes shorter. This 101 Films release thankfully runs the full 89.34. Don't expect a frame-by-frame restoration – the print's a little spotty.

"Ain't no fix that cain't be solved with a gun."

There are four new interviews. Actor Jocelyn Jones (19 minutes) has a good story about a scene where her character is nearly drowned. Editor Ted Nicolaou (15 minutes) addresses some of the *Texas Chain Saw* connections. Full Moon Features expert Chris Alexander provides an appreciation (17 minutes). A chat with Charles Band (nine minutes) is largely made up of digressions. Carried over from the 1999 DVD are a commentary by David Schmoeller, and an interview with the director (seven minutes). Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i When he was 15 years old, at boarding school, director David Schmoeller was a roommate of Tommy Lee Jones.

HEART OF STONE

Fear Of A Black Forest

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 23 JUNE

1950 | PG | Blu-ray

Director **Paul Verhoeven (Not that one...)**

Cast **Lutz Moik, Lotte Loebinger, Erwin Geschonneck, Paul Bildt**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Securing a place in** European movie history as the first East German production to be shot in colour, this state-sponsored folk tale is also a striking piece of fantasy cinema.

It's a cautionary fable, an anti-capitalism message dressed up with magic and whimsy. Seeking to improve his prospects and win the hand of a local lovely, raggedy "coal rat" Peter strikes deals with a pair of supernatural beings: the puckish, benign Glass Imp, and a frankly terrifying milky-eyed giant who goes by the name Dutch Michael.

This luminous new restoration showcases the film's vivid colour palette but also boosts its queasy, woodland weirdness, the essential unreality that made sister East German production *The Singing Ringing Tree* such a scarring experience for so many kids innocently viewing in the '70s. The sight of the walls of Dutch Michael's hovel decorated with pulsing, plundered hearts is an unforgettable image.

Extras A commentary by East German cinema expert Seán Allan sets the thoughtful, informed tone for the extras on this Eureka! Masters Of Cinema edition. Fellow academic Claire Knight presents an engaging exploration of the relationship between folklore and socialism (24 minutes), while a visual essay by Mary Going proves an equally fascinating examination of Germany's gothic and fairy tale traditions (22 minutes).

> **An anti-capitalism message dressed up with magic**

Also included are three studio folk tale shorts from East German studio DEFA: 1954's "The Bremen Town Musicians" (19 minutes) and 1957's "The Magic Ring" (20 minutes), both animated in charmingly creepy silhouette form, along with 1958's more traditionally animated but just as uncanny "Thumbelina's Adventures" (16 minutes). Plus: trailer; booklet.

Nick Setchfield

ℹ The film is based on Wilhelm Hauff's 1827 story "Das Kalte Herz", translated as "The Cold Heart" or "The Marble Heart".

RANI RANI RANI

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | N/A | Digital

A struggling cleaner is used in a reality-bending experiment by shady wannabe tech bros in this Indian time travel tale. "This will bring us toward God territory!" they tell each other, heedless of the human cost.

Tannishtha Chatterjee's truthful performance anchors the timey-wimey of it all as she finds herself confronted by multiple selves. With an evocative score that nudges into dream pop territory, this is an absorbing exploration of fourth-dimensional ethics, played with eerie restraint.

Nick Setchfield

MONSTERS OF CALIFORNIA

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED 7 JULY

2023 | 15 | Digital

Blink-182's Tom DeLonge brings a personal passion for the unexplained to this muddled comedy, which sees a bunch of slackers step into the world of the paranormal.

It's a film with ambition, roping everything from ghosts to Bigfoot into a unified theory of weirdness. But that scattershot approach to Fortean phenomena clutters the storyline, while the tone lurches from stoner humour to earnest messaging on the nature of reality. **Nick Setchfield**

CONSECRATION

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 |15 | Digital

Jena Malone puts on her best English accent for this deeply confused religious horror – despite no reason for her to have bothered. Thrown into the Edward Woodward role investigating strange goings-on in an extremist sect in deepest darkest Scotland, she's already an outsider.

The more bizarre secrets her amateur detective work uncovers, the less sense any of it makes. One brilliant mirror trick shot aside, there's not much to recommend this unspooky nun-sense.

Sarah Dobbs

THE SURRENDER

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | N/A | SVOD

SHUDDER **Elevated horror is** the order of the day in Julia Max's firmly grounded chiller, which deals with themes like accepting loved ones' flaws.

A fractious mother/daughter relationship is stress-tested when mom (*Grey's Anatomy*'s Kate Burton) hires an occultist to resurrect her dead husband.

The ritual that ensues has moments that are eerie, wince-inducing, and bleakly comic. But it's the blazing rows which precede it – brilliantly played by Burton and *The Boys*' Colby Minifie – that most impress. **Ian Berriman**

THE TALE OF OIWA'S GHOST

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★½☆☆

RELEASED 23 JUNE

1961 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Tai Katô**

Cast **Tomisaburo Wakayama, Tosshô Sawamura, Sentarô Fushimi**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Anyone who** bought Radiance's Japanese ghost stories box set *Daiei Gothic* will get déjà vu watching this standalone release from the label: the story is drawn from the same centuries-old source as one of its entries, 1959's *The Ghost Of Yotsuya*.

Many of the details vary, but it shares the same core incident: a samurai's wife is given a poison that disfigures her face, then returns as a ghost. It takes a considerable time for supernatural elements to come to the fore. Prior to that, the film is a grimly sobering depiction of the miserable lot of women in Edo-era Japan. (Oiwa isn't the only one treated as a disposable object – we also see her sister sold to a brothel.)

A tough, unremittingly bleak take on the material, it climaxes in a face-off that feels remarkably unchoreographed – a chaotic frenzy of screaming and shoji-smashing. But the shivers supplied by the betrayed Oiwa provide the highlight, as her deformed spirit rises up from a gloomy river, having had her corpse nailed to a door.

Extras An interview with horror director Mari Asato is split into an introduction (nine minutes) and a short appreciation (nine minutes). A "visual essay" (seven minutes) amounts to just a montage of clips from different movie adaptations of the story. Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

DIVINE LOVE

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★½☆☆

RELEASED 23 JUNE

2019 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Gabriel Mascaro**

Cast **Dira Paes, Julio Machado, Teca Pereira, Calum Rio**

This tale of a near-future Brazil is considerably nearer-future now that it's making its post-Bolsonaro Blu-ray debut. Set in 2027, it's an allegorical treatment of the degree to which the state exerts control over the bodies of its citizens.

Dira Paes is Joana, a registry office notary who uses her position to dissuade people from divorcing – in very hands-on style. For the god-fearing Joana is a member of Divine Love, an organisation which helps couples reignite the spark via support groups which combine Bible readings with (graphically depicted) spouse-swapping.

Director Gabriel Mascaro riffs on existing tech to create some striking images: doorway metal detectors are transmuted into scanners that display women's pregnancy status; the familiar imagery of ultrasound scanning is rendered bizarre when applied to a sperm test.

It's an eye-pleasingly sensual film too, with Mascaro and his DoP Diego Garcia employing fluorescent colours, smoke and lens flare to create a prettily gauzy vision.

On the other hand, this is a rather vaguely defined dystopia, and in dramatic terms, many will find it all rather too low-key – especially when it comes to the open-ended conclusion.

Extras Director Gabriel Mascaro explains his approach in a 14-minute interview. Plus: trailers; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

THE INVISIBLE SWORDSMAN

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 23 JUNE

1970 | PG | Blu-ray

Director **Yoshiyuki Kuroda**

Cast **Osamu Sakai, Sanshi Katsura, Hachirô Oka, Bunshi Katsura VI**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Aimed squarely** at kids, this Edo-era fantasy is liable to frustrate more cynical older viewers.

It centres on cowardly klutz Sanshiro (Osamu Sakai), who's clearly never going to live up to his samurai father's example. When dad is killed during a night watch by a bunch of thieving ronins, responsibility for exacting revenge falls upon our woefully ill-equipped hero. Luckily, a trip to the afterlife introduces a yōkai (a supernatural being) which supplies him with the recipe for an invisibility potion.

Cue buckets, logs and footwear bobbing about. The appeal of such effects soon palls, and while the baddies *eventually* realise that they can simply throw a sheet over Sanshiro, it's baffling that no one simply slices off the hand at the other end of a floating staff.

Extras A decent package from Arrow Video. Author Jonathan Clements's smoothly flowing commentary is extremely helpful when it comes to cultural context. Japanese cinema expert Jasper Sharp (27 minutes) locates the film within the history of the Daiei studio's special effects movies. The obligatory Kim Newman talking head (15 minutes) is a canter through fictional invisibility, from Perseus to *Forbidden Planet*. Plus: gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

FRANKENSTEIN 1970

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1958 | 12 | Blu-ray

Director **Howard W Koch**

Cast **Boris Karloff, Tom Duggan, Jana Lund, Donald Barry**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **We have the** success of Hammer's *The Curse Of Frankenstein*, a box office hit Stateside in 1957, to thank for this inferior effort, which returns Boris Karloff to the milieu where he made his name – now playing a descendant of the Baron, not his creation.

Though nominally set in the future, everything sure looks like 1958, barring the tech in the Baron's secret underground lab. How he sneaks an "atomic steam generator" downstairs is just one troubling detail of a script that's a terrible mess, riddled with clunky exposition.

No film starring Karloff can be all bad, mind. The horror icon shines in a sequence where he recounts the family history. And there's one cute gimmick: a scene of a woman being chased and strangled turns out to be a visiting movie crew at work.

But this doesn't obscure the film's chief weakness. The creature, a confusing combo of preserved body and new parts (hastily harvested from guests and servants), looks more like a mummy, with a bulky, bandage-wrapped head. A nonsensical final twist provides a rationale for this, but it still may be the least frightening Frankenstein's monster ever.

Extras Carried over from DVD for this Warner Archive Collection release: a chatty commentary teaming actor Charlotte Austin with two film historians; TV spot. **Ian Berriman**

PHOTO 12 / ALAMY (1)

DARK CITY

SFX Loves

Urban renewal

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED 23 JUNE

1998 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Alex Proyas**

Cast **Rufus Sewell, William Hurt, Kiefer Sutherland, Jennifer Connelly**

This fantastical pastiche of film noir is a five-course banquet for cinephiles.

Rufus Sewell plays an amnesiac who, after waking up near a murdered prostitute, discovers a name (John Murdoch), a wife (Jennifer Connelly) and reality-altering powers. But further mysteries present themselves. Why is it always night in this dank, sepia-toned city? Who are the bald-headed men who can knock people out simply by saying "sleep"? And why can no one remember the route out?

A masterpiece of world-building, it's a triumph in every department: production design, lighting, costuming. Even the visual effects of the nameless city reconfiguring itself stand up 27 years on. The only bum note is sounded by Kiefer Sutherland, who adopts speech patterns even William Shatner would find weirdly halting, as an exposition-spouting doctor. If only his dad been cast instead...

A year later, *The Matrix* traded in similar themes, generating heaps more of the green stuff. But for our money, Alex Proyas's magnum opus shades it.

Extras This Arrow Video restoration includes the Director's Cut and the Theatrical Cut (which trims 11 minutes and adds opening narration for dumbos). The centrepiece is an absorbing new hour-long documentary featuring Sewell, Proyas and various crew. Two new visual essays circle issues surrounding the film's use of noir (20 minutes), and the work of psychologist Edward Tolman (15 minutes) – the latter is mostly hot air.

Disc two's "Architecture Of Dreams" (2008, 34 minutes) manages to dig into topics like postmodernism without spiralling up its own backside. A 2008 Making Of is also worth your time, adding voices like co-writer David Goyer. There are a staggering seven commentaries: Proyas provides one new track; in a second, Aussie podcast geeks play "spot the homage". Plus: galleries; an intro by Proyas and critic Roger Ebert; trailer; 60-page booklet; poster; three art cards; a postcard; a business card. **Ian Berriman**

POV: you've forgotten your PIN at the cash machine.

i Kiefer Sutherland's character, Dr Daniel Schreber, was named after a German man who wrote a book about his schizophrenia.

ZEBRAMAN

Trouble and stripe

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2004/2010 | 12/15 | Blu-ray

Director **Takashi Miike**

Cast **Show Aikawa, Kyōka Suzuki, Riisa Naka, Masahiro Inoue**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **From bloody** gangster tale *Ichi The Killer* to psychosexual chiller *Audition*, director Takashi Miike has carved a rep as one of Japanese cinema's more idiosyncratic creative forces.

Zebraman ★★★☆☆ remains a swerve even for him. Inspired by such madcap TV fare as *Power Rangers* and *Ultraman*, it stars Show Aikawa as a deadbeat teacher who finds his inner superhero as he fights an alien invasion.

The frantically edited panto of the tokusatsu genre is faithfully and amusingly spoofed, but Miike is just as focused on the everyday tragedies of unfulfilled lives as the loopy, spandex-clad spectacle of it all.

Zebraman 2: Attack On Zebra City ★★★★☆ proves to be a slicker, pacier, altogether more stylish sequel, one that takes satiric aim at the machinations of the J-Pop industry. Plunging its ageing hero into a dystopian Tokyo, it's essentially *The Dark Zebra Returns* – with added musical numbers.

Extras Both these 88 Films releases come with commentaries from critic Joe Hickinbottom and erudite introductions by fellow cult movie expert Tom Mes (20 and 21 minutes apiece), placing the films' concerns in the broader context of Japanese culture. Contemporary documentaries (43/86 minutes) offer a wealth of fly-on-the-wall footage.

Zebraman ★★★★☆ also offers archival interviews with Miike (nine minutes), Aikawa (11 minutes) and theme song singer Ichiro Mizuki (one minute), while *Zebraman II* ★★★★☆ serves up more Miike (seven minutes) and Show Aikawa (five minutes), along with supporting cast Riki Abe (four minutes), Masahiro Inoue (five minutes) and Riisa Naka (five minutes).

The *Zebraman* disc also offers a glimpse of the film's premiere, with onstage superhero hi-jinks (three minutes), and a convincing fake trailer for the '70s TV show (one minute). What's billed as "deleted scenes" actually turns out to be more behind-the-scenes footage. Tsk.

Plus: trailers; TV spots; galleries; booklets.

Nick Setchfield

Both: "Is that a wig? Oh this? No no, of course not."

i The original Japanese title for *Zebraman 2: Attack On Zebra City* more closely translates as *Zebra City Fights Back*.

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS *A Minecraft Movie* • *Death Of A Unicorn* • *The End* (MUBI) • *Sinners* • *Snow White* • *Until Dawn* • *Y2K*

FEAR STREET: PROM QUEEN

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2025 | 18 | SVOD
Director **Matt Palmer**
Cast **India Fowler, Fina Strazza, Lili Taylor, Suzanna Son**

NETFLIX **This fourth entry in** the *Fear Street* franchise is a standalone feature based on RL Stine's 1992 novel *The Prom Queen*, though one character does survey the carnage and gasp, "It's worse than '78."

Like *Fear Street: Part Two – 1978*, this is a slasher movie, set not at summer camp this time but during high school prom at Shadyside High. It's 1988, and Lori Granger (India Fowler) is the biggest outsider to run for Prom Queen since Carrie White. Lori has no chance, surely – she's up against queen bee Tiffany Falconer (Fina Strazza) and the other mean girls in Tiffany's "Wolfpack". But then perhaps no one does, for a masked killer is chopping down the contenders.

After Chris Nash's *In A Violent Nature* last year made a tasty pretzel out of the slasher subgenre, Matt Palmer's *Prom Queen* is back-to-basics stuff, interested only in finding icky ways to dismember one-dimensional characters. This much gore is perhaps at odds with the glossy, tween-y vibe of the movie, but it certainly spikes the punch, and any viewers swaying past Lili Taylor's Vice Principal to make drunkenly for the dancefloor can cut loose to Tiffany, Chesney Hawkes and Prince.

A fun night out, then. Just don't expect to remember too much of it in the morning.

Jamie Graham

"This better not be just a *Blue Peter* annual."

FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

From Here To Eternity

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2025 | 12 | SVOD
Director **Guy Ritchie**
Cast **John Krasinski, Natalie Portman, Eiza González, Domhnall Gleeson**

APPLE TV+ **Harrison Ford's** retirement from the whole exhausting business of Indiana Jonesing has left a vacancy when it comes to stubbly treasure-chasers. Into that void steps John Krasinski as incorrigible adventurer Luke Purdue, on the trail of the fabled Fountain of Youth. He's joined by sister Charlotte – a withering Natalie Portman – and in flirtatious competition with Eiza González's guardian of secret knowledge.

Globe-trotting from Thailand to Vienna and the Pyramids, Guy Ritchie's film plunders as much from Dan Brown as Spielberg and Lucas. Esoteric clues to the Fountain's location are concealed in Tibetan scrolls, paintings by Old Masters and misprinted Bibles, cueing some serious Sherlocking. Elsewhere an action sequence aboard the wreck of the Lusitania invokes the salty spirit of Clive Cussler's paperback yarns.

> **"The story is overstuffed with characters"**

It's an easy, breezy watch, given typical propulsion by Ritchie. And Krasinski has charm to spare, even if the roguishly endearing Purdue is ultimately a charismatic blank. But the story is overstuffed with characters, including innumerable underdeveloped antagonists, while a relentlessly glib tone allows no sense of true, sweaty-palmed peril at any point.

Some all-too-knowing dialogue doesn't help. Told that he's "a child flying a kite in a lightning storm", Purdue ripostes "That's an oddly dramatic metaphor." It sounds like a script note that found its way into the finished product.

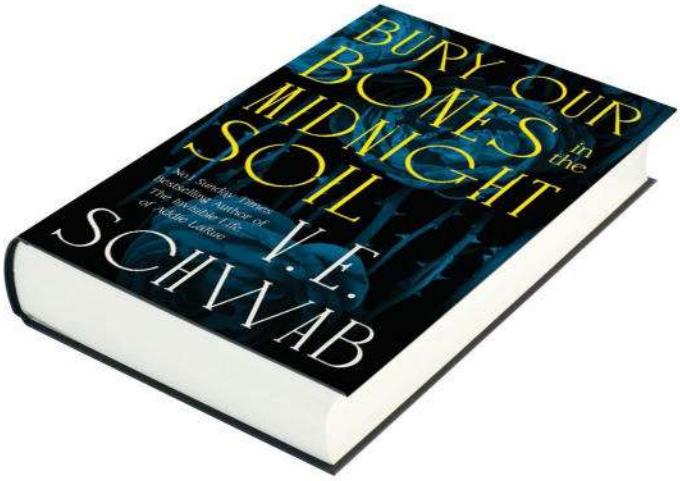
When the Fountain is – spoiler! – finally found, there's digital spectacle but no genuine sense of wonder, pushing this likeable but overfamiliar quest flick closer to *Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull* than *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*.

Nick Setchfield

i George Lucas toyed with making the Fountain of Youth the treasure in the third Indy film, including it in a 1984 treatment.

ROUND UP

Latvian animated film **FLOW** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, 30 June) won a Golden Globe. Free of dialogue, it follows a black cat trying to survive in a human-free landscape; when a flood comes, it hops on board a sailboat, journeying through submerged forest and city. We said: "It's a stimulating journey, motored by suggestions rather than slogans". Extras include a 58-minute doc, an animatic version, a director Q&A and two shorts. *Final Destination* fans should dig *Longlegs* director Osgood Perkins's latest. Expanding upon a Stephen King story, **THE MONKEY** (Blu-ray/DVD, out now) centres on a sinister toy that causes a horrific death every time its key is wound. We said: "A jump-filled, guts-splattered thrill-ride... never short of funny moments." Bonuses: 11 minutes of featurettes. Disney's latest live-action remake **SNOW WHITE** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, 30 June) was mired in controversy for its treatment of both the romance element and the seven dwarves. We said: "While Disney's decision-making may be dubious, director Marc Webb knows how to create a pacy, charming kids' film." Extras: a sing-along version, 30 minutes of featurettes; deleted scenes; bloopers. In **THE WOMAN IN THE YARD** (Blu-ray/DVD, 30 June), a veiled figure turns up outside the farmhouse of a mother and kids who recently lost the father in a car crash. We said: "The story is so slight as to essentially be a short film." Bonuses: two featurettes (12 minutes). Finally, the latest TV box set is **FALLOUT** Season One (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, 7 July).



BURY OUR BONES IN THE MIDNIGHT SOIL

Love, Death & Vampires

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

533 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **VE Schwab**

Publisher **Tor**

Lesbian vampires are a trope that dates back to at least the 19th century, but rarely have they been handled as interestingly and sensitively as in this latest novel from bestselling author VE Schwab. Combining hefty doses of blood and death with an examination of the curtailed lives of women in history, the book cleverly weaves together timelines, continents and cultures.

Bury Our Bones In The Midnight Soil (more of a tagline than a title, really) tells the stories of three women through history: one from 16th century Spain, another from 19th century England, and the third from 21st century America.

The book begins by focusing on the oldest and youngest of the three women: Maria (died 1532) and Alice (died 2019). Maria is restless and impatient, growing up in a small Spanish town, knowing that her future life will be defined by the man she marries, and fiercely determined to not be held back by the world or its expectations of women. Alice, meanwhile, is a Scottish student in Boston, trying to move on from the tragedies of her childhood and reinvent herself on a new continent, hoping desperately to make the most of what university and independence might offer. Both their lives are violently interrupted – to radically different reactions from the pair, who must now find ways to move forward in their new lives as vampires.

The opening of the story reads so naturalistically that the fatal bites come as almost as much of a shock to the reader as to the women themselves – a sudden reminder, after being absorbed in the lives and cultures of Alice and Maria, that this is in fact a genre read. Once they're transformed, ground rules are quickly laid down: sunlight won't kill them (only make them nauseous and weary), and neither will religion; grave dust is damaging, but only destruction of the heart will end a vampire's life.

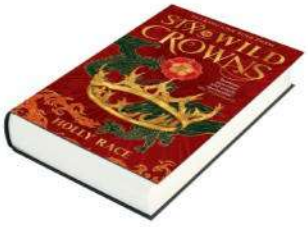
Maria (who renames herself Sabine) delights in her freedom, exploring the continent while making and losing friends and lovers along the way. There are shades of *Interview With The Vampire* here, with found families of blood eaters devouring the world together. There's even a new convert who, like *Interview*'s Louis, struggles with the killing of humans, to the contempt of their hedonistic maker. Alice, meanwhile, is devastated by the

> **"There are shades of Interview With The Vampire"**

loss of the life she was attempting to establish, and determined to track down her creator and demand an explanation, as well as some kind of hope that this is not forever. The third of the women (died 1827) is also revealed – like Sabine, desperate to escape the restricted life she was born into, and dreaming of a reality in which she can love another woman and not be punished for it.

Their stories are powerfully and engagingly told. There's real anguish at the heartbreakingly unjust rules women through history are bound by, both in terms of their expectations of life and permitted sexualities. But at no point are any of the three mere cyphers or stereotypes; each is blood-warm and real, and the mistakes they make, while often devastating, are all the more human for each woman's loss of humanity. **Rhian Drinkwater**

i VE Schwab starts a UK tour on 24 June, visiting London, Bath, Oxford, Nottingham, Manchester, York and Edinburgh.



SIX WILD CROWNS

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

416 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Holly Race**

Publisher **Orbit Books**

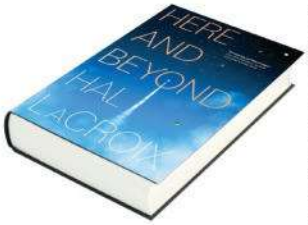
Henry VIII was a monstrous figure, a man-child monarch who had two of his wives executed. Because of his myriad faults, he fascinates us, but in recent years, as the work of historians has shifted focus, he's increasingly had to play second fiddle to those in his orbit. This in turn has played into historical fiction, notably via Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*.

With the publication of *Six Wild Crowns*, the ripples have reached fantasy fiction, in that Holly Race's first novel for adults imagines a world where a polygamous Henry is required, seemingly for the good of the kingdom, to marry six wives.

It's a world we see from the perspective of (Ann) Boleyn, whom we first meet as a besotted newlywed, and a gay lady-in-waiting, (Jane) Seymour. As the book shifts between their perspectives, we gradually realise that Henry isn't to be trusted.

The central narrative here is concerned with misogyny and the exercise of patriarchal power, themes Race teases out as she carefully builds her alternate Tudor world. It's a serious book at heart then, but also one with plenty of intrigue, adventure and, as when we're introduced to (Ann of) Cleves, who personally seeds the idea she's "an ugly lump" in order to avoid Henry's unwanted attentions, dry humour. Impressively done.

Jonathan Wright



HERE AND BEYOND

★★★½☆

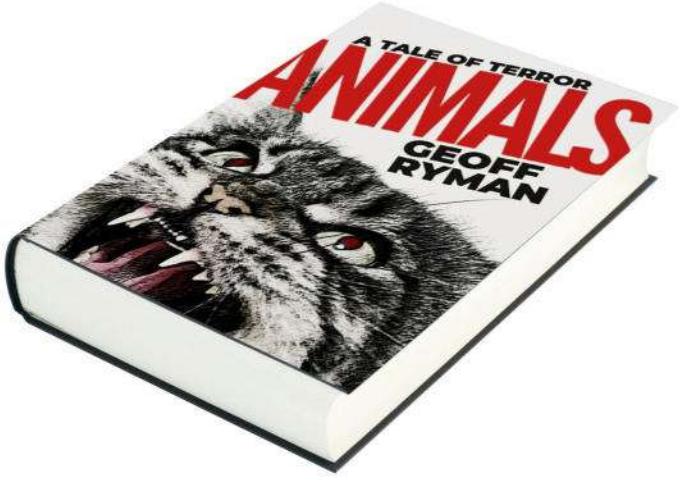
RELEASED **3 JULY**
316 pages | **Hardback/ebook**
Author **Hal LaCroix**
Publisher **Bloomsbury Publishing**

A multigenerational saga set on a spaceship taking around 600 (depending on how the breeding program's going) colonists (though, mostly being of liberal-left leanings, it's not a term they're keen on) to a Goldilocks planet 300 years away, *Here And Beyond* is epic in scale while fascinatingly prosaic in its detail.

Told in a series of different eras from throughout the voyage (but following certain families), it's more concerned with the social, theological, mental and physical effects of such a voyage on the humans enduring it – especially those in mid-voyage for who the ship (christened Shipworld) will be their whole world.

It's a well-realised setting, complete with a river, robot birds and rituals, and the book is packed with intriguing ideas, thought-provoking motifs and unanswered questions to ponder. It's also weirdly lacking in human conflict. There are major flashpoints, but they often happen "off-screen". Most of the drama we actually witness is about as turbulent as a heated planning meeting. They even sleep en masse through a possible alien encounter at one point.

This is clearly a deliberate artistic choice, as the author concentrates on effects rather than causes. But it does mean that while the book engages on an intellectual level, it rarely truly grabs you on an emotional one. Is there a genre called mellow drama? **Dave Golder**



ANIMALS
Wild Things

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
244 pages | **Hardback/paperback/ebook**
Author **Geoff Ryman**
Publisher **NewCon Press**

Identity has been a recurring fascination for lauded science fiction/fantasy author Geoff Ryman. It's in the shared consciousness of a hive mind in 1989's *The Child Garden*, and his more recent novel *Him* (2023), which reimagined Jesus as a trans man.

It's in his pioneering '90s hypertext novel *253*, which allowed readers to experience each character as either interconnected or separate, depending on their chosen format (online or paperback). The idea of merging identities has been a key thread throughout his long career.

Horror, however, has not. *Animals* represents Ryman's first foray into the genre, and while it features his comfort themes, as well as elements of his self-described subgenre of "mundane science fiction" (stories set on Earth, with realistic science), it's startling how good he is at describing banal nightmares. This book contains grotesque imagery even Clive Barker would wince at.

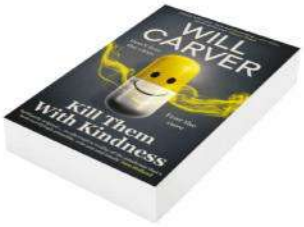
The story sees a different kind of pandemic hit the UK, one that initially affects animals, turning them into zombies (much scarier than it sounds), before spreading to human children, and infecting them with animal traits such as growling, sniffing out danger and craving canned dog food. While this all sounds a bit Shaun Hutson at a furries convention, Ryman's genius makes it work.

It's not perfect: world-building time-jumps scattered throughout take you out of the story, feeling more suited to something like *Bird Box* than this book. Also, cat lovers will need to keep tissues and a neuralyzer nearby at all times.

> **"Has imagery even Clive Barker would wince at"**

The Child Garden made it onto Gollancz's SF Masterworks imprint, and there are several poetic moments in *Animals* that'll make you feel you're reading a modern classic worthy of that series. Ryman's mastery over mood and emotion makes it read like a lost John Wyndham novel, with added post-pandemic symbolism. Barking mad then, but bloody brilliant. **Sam Ashurst**

i Geoff Ryman set up the UK government's first web design team in the '90s; they worked on the 10 Downing Street website.



KILL THEM WITH KINDNESS

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **19 JUNE**
292 pages | **Paperback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **Will Carver**
Publisher **Orenda Books**

Imagine *Dr Strangelove* with weaponised viruses instead of atomic bombs, and you've got the genome of this sledgehammer-subtle Covid-19 satire. As a shadowy cabal of world leaders plot to boost their electoral chances with a lethal pandemic, a scientist fights back with an infection genetically engineered to make the populus kinder.

But for all the sci-fi elements – *Red Dwarf*-esque positive viruses, nanotechnology – Will Carver's novel is first and foremost a scathing takedown of government responses to the coronavirus outbreak. Although the names have been changed, the inspirations for certain characters and scenarios are clear. References to lockdowns, wet markets and politicians thinking the rules don't apply to them are painfully familiar.

And that's *Kill Them With Kindness*'s biggest problem. By hovering so close to reality, it plays out like a slightly over-the-top, conspiracy-heavy alternative history rather than a story in its own right. Few would argue with the targets of Carver's heartfelt polemic, but there are so many of them – from hate-filled social media platforms to national leaders speaking without thinking – that it's sometimes hard to digest everything. It could do with a little more focus, subtlety and – arguably – distance from Covid-19. **Richard Edwards**

A "model sheet" for the Ecto-1.

Packaging for Kenner's Ecto-1 toy.

They couldn't use any actor likenesses.

A catalogue page for the GhostPopper.

A French sales poster for the toy line.

The Slimer design for a short pilot.

THE REAL GHOSTBUSTERS: A VISUAL HISTORY

SFX Loves

Even Better Than The Real Thing

★★★★★

RELEASED 8 JULY

256 pages | Hardback/ebook

Authors **Troy Benjamin, Craig Goldberg**

Publisher **Dark Horse Books**

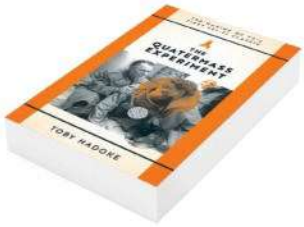
Ghostbusters was a box office smash in 1984, but the animated spin-off and associated toys arguably did just as much to secure the franchise's legacy – certainly for a generation of kids too young to appreciate the film's more adult humour. As this comprehensive book reveals, however, the original group of writers (including future *Babylon 5* creator J Michael Straczynski) treated *The Real Ghostbusters* as a serious sci-fi comedy gig, relishing the chance to unleash new spooks on New York.

The vast archive of production sketches, memos and photos will be enough to win over hardcore fans. But it's the meticulously researched history of the show that lifts the book above average Making Of territory. The assembled talking heads deliver on both anecdotes and trivia: everything from the origins of the "*Real*" in the title to the identity of the mystery singer (credited as "John Smith") on the TV version of the theme song. They also claim that the Ecto-2 gyrocopter was the only element of the show created specifically with a toy in mind.

By the time *Ghostbusters II* was released in 1989, the filmmakers were borrowing from the cartoon – after reading this book you'll understand why. **Richard Edwards**

i With the cartoon forbidden from copying the movie actors, Peter Venkman's hair was based on Bryan Ferry's.

THE REAL GHOSTBUSTERS: A VISUAL HISTORY TM & © 2025 CPII HOLDINGS, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



THE QUATERMASS EXPERIMENT

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

350 pages | Paperback

Author **Toby Hadoke**

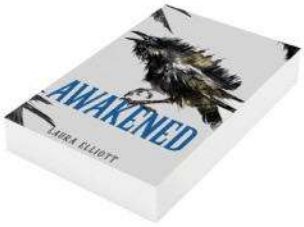
Publisher **Ten Acre Films**

A landmark production, Nigel Kneale's 1958 serial saw an astronaut return to Earth having absorbed two fellow crew, then mutate into a monstrous man/plant hybrid. Toby Hadoke's obsessively detailed study (subtitled *The Making Of TV's First Sci-Fi Classic*) strives to do justice to its status in British TV history.

Drawing on BBC memos, Kneale's own archive, press cuttings, and interviews by the author (dating back as far as 1989!), he leaves no stone unturned. Opening with a partial biography of Kneale, the book progresses to an episode by episode Making Of (taking up about 50%) which compares different breakdowns to trace the development of Kneale's ideas. Need to know precisely when the cast got a bus to the studio? Hadoke has it covered.

Letters from Kneale's dad are a particular delight – and reveal that the cast took a bow at the end. Elsewhere, Hadoke covers topics like the later script book and the DVD restoration of the two parts which were recorded.

The microscopic approach can get overwhelming – it's hard to imagine anyone's heart leaping at a breakdown of tweaks to the *Italian translation* of the book. But Hadoke leavens this avalanche of data with wry asides, and geeky trivia: did you know the composer of a library cue fathered the R Whites ad's Secret Lemonade Drinker? You do now. **Calvin Baxter**



AWAKENED

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
352 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Laura Elliott**
Publisher **Angry Robot**

Ever wish you had more time? In the near future, scientists have developed a neural chip that can suppress your need to sleep. It's the must-have accessory for politicians, the military and pretty much everyone else, but when the tech goes spectacularly wrong, the world's population is transformed into a mindless horde known as the Sleepless.

With a bunch of scientists holed up in the Tower of London searching for a cure, journalist Laura Elliott's gripping debut novel could easily have played out as a by-the-numbers zombie tale. It turns out to be nothing of the sort, however, as narrator Thea Chares (one of the original team who developed the tech) recounts her experiences in diary form. A closer analogue, in fact, is *The Silence Of The Lambs*, as Thea's interrogations of a charismatic Sleepless who has somehow retained his intelligence become increasingly quid pro quo.

Elliott anchors the story with lots of real-life science about sleep and chronic illness, but despite Thea's seemingly objective approach to her research, you come to realise that her guilt-ridden testimony may not be as reliable as you originally thought. Come the end, you may be frustrated that *Awakened* doesn't supply all the answers, but its skilful blurring of dreams and reality is undeniably appropriate.

Richard Edwards

BASILISK

★★★★☆

RELEASED 1 JULY
352 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Matt Wixey**
Publisher **Titan Books**

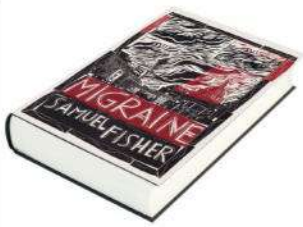
If you're one of the people who couldn't sleep in a room with a TV in it after seeing *The Ring*, you might want to give *Basilisk* a swerve, because this post-post-cyberpunk hacker horror will make you afraid of your computer.

When ethical hacker Alex uncovers her first Helmsman puzzle, she's intrigued, but she assumes it's a straightforward (if especially tricky) ARG (alternate reality game). However, the more she and fellow hacker Jay play, the more it seems like the lethal cognitive weapon at the heart of the game might not be fictional after all. And the more you read about it, the more vulnerable you become.

Thrillingly dense, with philosophical conundrums stacked on top of technical paradoxes and footnotes on its footnotes, this is the kind of story where you only stop reading to open a Google search (on the parable of the cave, or Descartes's demon, or Roko's basilisk). And though Alex tells us she's doomed from the very first sentence, there's a compelling urgency to her predicament – even as her narration becomes ever more untrustworthy.

More readable than *Snow Crash* and far less annoying than *House Of Leaves,* this is a smart and scary book that'll keep you turning the pages in spite of its insistence that it's going to ruin your life.

Sarah Dobbs



MIGRAINE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 3 JULY
192 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Samuel Fisher**
Publisher **Corsair**

Psychogeography might sound like the name of a Jack the Ripper walking tour, but it's actually a way of talking about people's relationship to their surroundings. The idea is that the environment in which we live shapes how we feel and how we act.

Inspired by Iain Sinclair's meandering musings on London, *Migraine* is a kind of psychogeography of a climate-changed near future. In a version of the capital that is emerging, derelict, from both a great freeze and an epidemic of migraines, Ellis and Sam explore the remade streets together. Their goal is, nominally, to find Ellis's ex, and the narrative goes back and forth between their present-day rambling and flashbacks to Ellis's doomed relationship with Luna.

In theory, this all sounds great; in practice, it proves to be less than the sum of its parts. Neither Ellis nor Sam are particularly engaging company, and Ellis is such a rubbish boyfriend in the flashbacks that it's hard to root for the romance.

There's a strong sense of grotty, ruined place, and the snapshots of how communities responded to the omnipresent pain and auras of the migraines are quirkily interesting, but we suspect that how you feel about this novel will ultimately depend on how invested you are in the fate of east London.

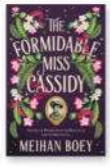
Nic Clarke

REISSUES

Our pick of the paperbacks is Lev Grossman's Arthurian tale **THE BRIGHT SWORD** (★★★★★, 26 June, Penguin). It's centred on an original character: Collum, an aspiring knight

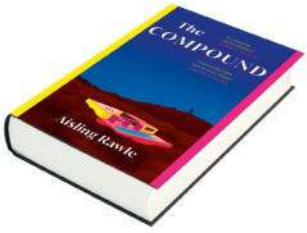
who arrives at Camelot, only to find that Arthur is dead, and the Round Table has been reduced to a handful of oddballs. Together with Merlin's apprentice Nimue, they set out to reclaim Excalibur and rebuild Camelot. We said: "Skillful plotting and vivid imagery make this an experience to savour... A boldly ambitious take on Arthurian lore." Set in the universe of the upcoming Archetype Entertainment videogame, **EXODUS: THE ARCHIMEDES ENGINE** (★★★★½, 19 June, Tor) marks Peter F Hamilton's return to space opera. It

follows a young man born in the Centauri system who dreams of journeying into space. Setting out to source the necessary drive, he gets caught up in the political machinations of the post-human "Celestials". We said: "Packed with gloriously imaginative flourishes, multiple intersecting plotlines and brilliantly realised battle scenes... a bravura performance." Finally, Meihan Boey's historical fantasy **THE FORMIDABLE MISS CASSIDY** (★★★★½, |3 July, ONE) sees an enigmatic Scottish governess tackling a



series of supernatural mysteries in 1890s Singapore. We said: "Her adventures are all jolly good fun... Boey has created a wonderful original character while also retaining her sense of mystery."

Reviews



THE COMPOUND

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **3 JULY**

336 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Aisling Rawle**

Publisher **The Borough Press**

The problem with fictional dystopian worlds is that reality is plenty dystopian all by itself.

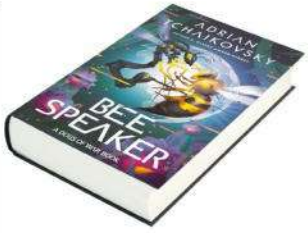
On reality TV show *The Compound*, 10 boys and 10 girls are dropped into a semi-furnished mansion in the middle of the desert and told to couple up. Hidden cameras track their every move, while personal screens issue them with secret tasks. If they succeed, they're rewarded: with food, furniture, or anything else they might want. If not? They're banished from the Compound, left to trek back to safety.

It's basically *Love Island*, but with the threat of feral dog attacks any time someone gets dumped. Our narrator, Lily, is rated the second most attractive girl on the show, so finding someone to share her bed is no problem – but when the game gets more dangerous, how much can she really trust any of her fellow "residents"?

Despite dark references to "the war", the glimpses we get of the world beyond the Compound doesn't sound too dissimilar to our own, and honestly, neither does any of the reality TV stuff.

Given the number of high-concept reality dating games already being produced – *The Honesty Box*, *Too Hot To Handle*, *Dating Naked* – this one doesn't really push many boundaries, and frankly you'd find half a dozen Lilys on any season of *Big Brother*.

Sarah Dobbs



BEE SPEAKER

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

448 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Adrian Tchaikovsky**

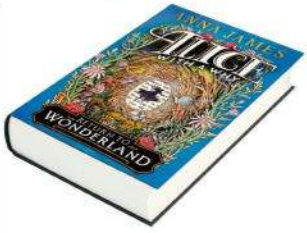
Publisher **Head Of Zeus**

Earth has suffered the equivalent of a kind of gradual zombie apocalypse. Climate change, rampant capitalism and small wars undermined human society's technological bases, and now it's a wild and strange planet. Yet is there hope? When a plea for help reaches a Mars colonised by bioengineered "people" and the distributed intelligence of Bees, a crew sets off across the void.

Clever and well-intentioned Martians who know best arrive to find themselves, despite their best efforts, hopelessly unprepared for the vibrancy of the world they're visiting. Everything that can go wrong duly does.

Adrian Tchaikovsky shows us what unfolds from multiple viewpoints, an approach that lets him tease out the weirdness of different intelligences. If you're cold-blooded, for instance, how does this shape how you see things? How would it affect your psyche to live for centuries?

While this is the third book in the Dogs Of War sequence, it's not necessary to have read the other volumes, because *Bee Speaker* functions brilliantly as a standalone novel, a book that's by turns funny and poignant, while all the time moving at a cracking pace. It may be that the sheer rate of Tchaikovsky's recent output can't be sustained, but at the moment he may just be the UK's best science fiction novelist. **Jonathan Wright**



ALICE WITH A WHY

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

256 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Anna James**

Publisher **HarperCollins Children's Books**

One of the classic works of English children's literature, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland* has inspired dozens of sequels, parodies and retellings since its publication in 1865. This latest one skips forward to 1919 and the aftermath of the Great War, in which the original Alice's granddaughter Alyce ("with a Y") has lost her father.

Playing in the garden, Alyce discovers an invitation that was maybe not meant for her, and quickly finds herself falling down to Wonderland. Here she meets the Mad Hatter, March Hare and Dormouse, and learns that a war between the Sun King and the Queen of the Moon is playing havoc with the days and nights. The tea party had hoped that Alice ("the right Alice") would sort it out for them, but in her place Alyce takes on the quest.

Illustrated by Matthew Land, it's a charming tale, full of the absurdities you'd expect. Alyce herself feels slightly more rounded than her predecessor, as she struggles to come to terms with her father's death, but is just as happy to wander through a world of wonders, taking on tasks assigned to her and asking why everyone can't just be a bit more sensible.

It's a slighter piece of work with a more plot-driven, less inventive feel than the original, but an engaging follow-up for modern children.

Rhian Drinkwater

ALSO OUT

As ever, there's plenty more books we couldn't squeeze in. In Megan E O'Keefe's space opera **THE TWO LIES OF FAVEN SYTHE** (out now, Orbit), the titular navigator investigates the disappearance of her mentor, accompanied by a famed pirate. The search leads to a cosmic graveyard, and a galaxy-spanning conspiracy. Pitched as "perfect for fans of Grady Hendrix and Joe Hill", Matt Serafini's supernatural thriller **FEEDERS** (19 June, Gallery) follows a 19-year-old wannabe influencer whose dreams of fame turn decidedly dark after she discovers an off-the-grid social media platform which rewards the very worst in human behaviour. Ben Aaronovitch's urban fantasy series Rivers Of London racks up entry 10, 15 (if you count the novellas) or 28 (if you count the graphic novels and the short story collection) with **STONE & SKY** (3 July, Gollancz). This time out, Detective Sergeant Peter Grant heads to Aberdeen for a holiday, where he's pulled into the investigation of a dead body with gills and a missing geophysicist. The latest kid-friendly novella in the Icons series, Kalynn Bayron's **DOCTOR WHO: SHIRLEY JACKSON AND THE CHAOS BOX** (out now, BBC Children's Books) sees the Fifteenth Doctor and the author of *The Haunting Of Hill House* exploring the origins of a glowing box which inspires murderous deeds. Finally, the title of **X-MEN '97: THE ART AND MAKING OF THE ANIMATED SERIES** (3 July, Abrams) rather speaks for itself, eh? Expect storyboards, character sketches, vehicle designs, animatic frames, cels and plenty more.

THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

VE Schwab

The bestselling novelist on sprints, tattoos and "embracing the journey"

JENNA MAURICE

What is your daily writing routine like?

I start in the mornings, because if I wait until the afternoon, chances are other things will get in the way. I use short writing sprints of either 15 or 20 minutes, because I measure time invested instead of words amassed, and I tend to set out with a single chapter or scene in mind, the goal being to start and finish one a day, giving myself a sense of completion.

How do you deal with writers' block/procrastination?

I break chapters into scenes and scenes into beats, I search for small doses of gratification like snacks along a marathon route. And when I get stuck, I take the time to figure out why. If it's because I don't know what happens next (rare, as a planner), I stop and figure it out. If I'm daunted by the task (much more common, as a perfectionist), I trick myself into outlining the scene as a way to ease my way into drafting it. If I'm tired or uninspired, I go find something to refill the creative well.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

It's probably *The Invisible Life Of Addie LaRue*, by sheer virtue of how long I

> **"Each book is a time capsule of the person I was when I wrote it"**

went without writing it. For eight years, I let it grow roots in my head, so that by the time I finally dragged it out, it was a very messy process. I was so frightened of doing it wrong, of the chasm between a perfect idea and the imperfect reality. I had to make peace with it.

Is there anything about one of your books which you wish you could go back and "fix"?

No! Which is not to say any of them are perfect, or that I'd write them the same way now. But each is a time capsule of the person and the writer I was when I wrote it.

What would be your desert island book?

It would have to be *The Count Of Monte Cristo*. I read that book for the first time when I was in my teens, and again last year, and I think I could read it again and again and fall in love every time.

Recommend one book that you love, but which is not very well known.

I'm cheating and choosing two! Caitlin Rozakis's *Dreadful*, and Sarah Maria Griffin's *Eat The Ones You Love*.

What's the oddest place you've seen one of your books?

On a prison cell shelf in *Orange Is The New Black*!

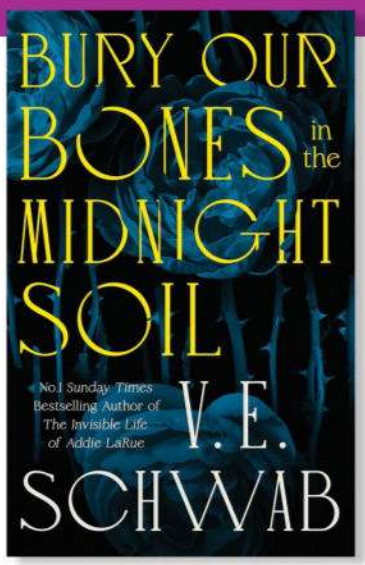
What's the best gift you've received from a reader?

It has to be the tattoos – I consider this a gift. The sheer idea that something I invented could mean so much to other people. That the words I agonised over could earn a place on their skin, that they want to carry the characters with them for life, it will never, ever get old.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've received or read?

That there's no formula, no set of steps, no sense in looking at anyone else's paper. What works for one author doesn't work for another (I literally created a podcast [*No Write Way*] just to highlight this), but also that you shouldn't compare your behind-the-scenes to someone else's highlight reel. You are on your own journey. So embrace it.

Bury Our Bones In The Midnight Soil by VE Schwab is published by Tor in hardback, audio and ebook, RRP £22.



The Count Of Monte Cristo's Alexandre Dumas.

ALEXANDRE DUMAS: SEPIA TIMES / CONTRIBUTOR/GETTY

First Read
AN EXTRACT FROM A NEW BOOK

Bee Speaker

by Adrian Tchaikovsky

From Arthur C Clarke award winner Adrian Tchaikovsky comes the third instalment of the Dogs Of War science fiction series

A distress call from an old world. A mission to save them. And now here they are – 300 million kilometres from home. And it has already gone horribly wrong.

Honestly, even though the walls of the Factory weren't exactly friendly on the eye, Cricket was glad to get into their shadow. Not that bad things couldn't happen to you there, of course. If he was scared of the dog, well, this was where the dog came from. It was, to give the place its full name, the Dog Factory.

Tall concrete walls, narrow windows. Electric light, shining coldly within. There were ways of generating that, still, but they were feeble, unreliable things. The monastery's antique solar panels often went a whole day without collecting enough to light a room an hour beyond dusk. Mostly they went without, fell back on more robust methods. Husbanded the understanding of such things for some future time when it would have a practical application. Here in the Factory, they'd never lost the use of them.

Partly it was that what the Apiary knew of the lost world was fragments and scraps compared to what the people of the Factory had never forgotten. Partly, that there were some places like this designed in the last years of the Old, built with redundancy in mind. The Factory generated its own power from the deep earth, or else the rushing of buried watercourses, or something else more reliable than the often-shrouded sun, or the fragile vanes and bearings of wind generators. The lights were always on there, and he could hear the rumble and judder of machines in the chambers beneath the earth. The places where the dogs were made.

The place was square, a great tower at each corner that was chimney and sentry-post both. He saw movement up there. The small figures, relatively, that were humans surely bigger than skinny little Cricket. The big figures, objectively, that were the dogs, the Bioforms. He'd heard that, back in the day, there were more kinds. Perhaps, elsewhere in the world, there still were. Cats and rats and lizards and who knew what else? The Factory just made dogs, though. Probably that was for the best. Cricket didn't want to spend his days digging up rat nests and collecting eggs.

One of the four big chimneys was smoking, a lazy trail of black smudging up into the low hanging cloud. It could have been anything, of course. Wood for warmth. Old rubbish. Cricket knew in his heart it wasn't, though. When the black smoke rose from the Factory chimneys it was the failures they were disposing of. That was what everyone said.

The doors were solid, metal shod, of a newer vintage than the Factory itself. Back in the day, an alliance of Bunker faction had tried to take the Factory over and own its dogs. The putative claimants had regretted their hubris sure enough, but they'd used some portable artillery to stove the door in before the furious resistance of armed dogs had hounded them off across the hills.

The new door had been a gift from one of the villages, brought by monks like Cricket a generation ago. The Factory got a lot of gifts, just like the surviving Bunkers did. Not quite taxes, not quite extortion. Just an acknowledgement by those who scrabbled at the land, of those who held the guns or had the dogs.

And us? Cricket wondered. If the world was a machine of awkward, ill-fitting parts, then the Apiary was trying to be the grease between them, so that everything could just keep moving one more day at a time. You could get crushed, between the pieces of a machine. Looking up at the Factory's bleak walls, Cricket was all too aware of it.

A man, stocky, broad-shouldered, a lot bigger than Cricket, came out to greet them. He had a mild brown eye and a cold glass one, like a smaller version of the red lens set into the dog's skull. Through both glinting orbs, the Factory would be watching.

"Good afternoon," Cricket said, aware that the day was shading into evening, really. The business with the wheel was going to see him walking the track in pitch darkness, or worse.

"Bellman," said the Factory man. "Willem Bellman, ain't it." He had an accent, a man who'd grown up in one of the villages of the West Edge, where they spoke in more of a drawn-out way, like their vowels were digging their heels in. "And you're Siblen...?"

"Cricket." A small bob, keeping his hood up, and the tall collar of his under-robe zipped, so that nothing of his face could be seen save the eyes. The mystique of the Apiary, as he'd been taught. Enough to give a

The Author

Adrian Tchaikovsky is a British science fiction and fantasy writer known for a wide variety of work, including the Children Of Time, Final Architecture, Dogs Of War, Tyrant Philosophers and Shadows Of The Apt series, and standalone books such as *Elder Race*, *Doors Of Eden*, *Spiderlight* and many others. *Children Of Time* and its series has won the Arthur C Clarke and BSFA awards, and his other works have won the British Fantasy, BSFA and Sidewise Awards.

PORTRAIT © TOM PEPPERDINE 2022

village bravo pause, perhaps, before laying hands on a monk or pushing one around. Probably not anything the Factory people were going to be spooked by. But Bellman, despite his size, didn't look the pushy type. He smiled easily and with all his face save that glass eye. Then he stepped forward and reached up to scratch under the chin of the dog who'd come with Cricket. Just right into the huge creature's shadow, fingers within inches of those fangs. Not a second's hesitation. There had been a dog, once, with one of the Bunkers. Maybe one stolen from the Factory, or a renegade who'd run off. Maybe one come from elsewhere, some other place they made dogs. It had been mad, though. They'd kept it on a chain, let it slip only when there was an enemy in sight. They'd had to kill it in the end, Cricket had heard, because it was more of a danger to them than a deterrent to their foes. He'd seen it, the once. Seen the people who'd had it on a leash, half- strangled; the whips and the spiked clubs to keep it in line. Seen how they were terrified of it. A generation before, one of the villages had a dog, they said. Worked hard, carried loads no human could and knew with a sniff whether any stranger was there for good or ill, but it had lived outside the village proper, and everyone had kept their distance for all the years of its life. Scared, because if it had a mind to it could have killed every human being in that village. And here was Willem Bellman just scratching this dog behind the ears like it was any village pet or working animal.

The next day, after a solid night's sleep built mostly on exhaustion, they had the wagon ready and empty, cleaned so that barely a whiff of over-excited pup remained to it and the cracked axle bound up with rawhide by some factory tinker. A little package of wafer-like bread, too, or wafer stuff that was more like bread than anything else. A jug of water for Cricket to refill his plastic bottle from. A warning that they'd seen scavengers from one of the Bunkers in eyeshot of the

"When the black smoke rose from the Factory chimneys it was the failures they were disposing of"

walls overnight – the eyes of the Factory being proof against the dark when they needed to be.

"I'll be careful," Cricket promised, although honestly the country was light on cover all the way back to Brokebridge, and if some Bunker warriors caught him he'd have to hope the old monastery glamour and his lack of anything pillage-able was enough to keep him safe. Still he kept to the track and kept his hood and collar up. A weird little silhouette against the flat, white morning sky, some gnome of folklore rather than just a little man in several layers of robes. And the Bunker soldiers didn't stay him, or even appear. Instead, on the road, close to where the wagon had thrown its wheel the previous day, there were birds. Black, ragged swatches of feathers circling and dropping and squabbling amongst themselves over something close by the track in the long grass.

He should never have looked, but curiosity had an odd place in monastery teachings. They were unworldly, which meant things like this – earthy, worldly things – were supposed to be beneath their notice. And at the same time, they were custodians of knowledge, meaning they were supposed to want to *know*.

Cricket wanted to know. He'd always fallen more towards that pole of the spectrum. Something was dead out there, and if it was a person, someone should report it. He might even be capable of bringing the corpse to Brokebridge on the wagon, if he was feeling sufficiently full of soup and wafer-bread to put in the effort. And if it was an animal, well, possibly that should be reported, or maybe if it was fresh he could even load it up and bring it in for the pot. Waste not, want not.

It wasn't an animal, neither natural nor Bioform. It wasn't a human either, or not any human Cricket had ever seen before. It was a prodigy, a monster. Truly a *monster*, in that sense the Prior taught. *Monstrum*, a warning of terrible things to come, by its very appearance. A thing from elsewhere and otherwise and old stories, lying there dead as though it had fallen from the sky.

Read more in Bee Speaker, the third instalment in Adrian Tchaikovsky's Dogs Of War series, out now in hardback and ebook from Head Of Zeus.

BATMAN: HUSH 2

Getting the bandage back together

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **DC Comics**

Writer **Jeph Loeb**

Artist **Jim Lee**

ISSUES 1-3 **Of all the classic** Batman stories likely to get a follow-up, an obvious immediate contender was the 2002–2003 saga *Hush*. A twisty thriller that introduced Tommy Elliot, aka Hush, childhood friend of Bruce Wayne turned corrupt, bandage-clad enemy, the original story ran for 12 issues and was a massive success, but it's taken the creative team of Jeph Loeb and Jim Lee 22 years to reunite for *Hush 2*.

What we've got here isn't exactly a direct sequel, however: the villainous Hush has appeared multiple times in Batman comics over the last two decades, via different writers and artists. Added to this, *Hush 2* is set in current Batman continuity, so anyone going straight from the original *Hush* to this is going to be a little perplexed.

In this first of two planned six-issue arcs (with the first appearing in the main ongoing *Batman* title, from issue 158 onwards), the Joker is mortally wounded by Hush and Batman is forced to save his greatest adversary's life. This puts him in direct conflict with resurrected ex-Robin Jason Todd (who was originally killed by the Joker), and it soon becomes clear that Hush has plans for vengeance against the entire "Bat-family" of heroes.

We're three issues into this first arc, and Loeb's typically measured approach to plot means that there are dozens of directions in which the story could potentially go. There's no shortage of action sequences here (all of which are slickly executed via Jim Lee's excellent, kinetic art), and Loeb throws in some effective dialogue scenes and intriguing set-ups, including a towering new adversary called Silence.

The results are never less than entertaining, but the unavoidable comparisons to the first *Hush* don't do this new adventure any favours. The original's multi-layered mystery (combined with its Batman/Catwoman relationship shenanigans and a "play the hits" approach to cramming in multiple Batman villains) gave it an edge that this sequel is lacking so far.

> **"Hush has plans for vengeance against the entire "Bat-family" of heroes"**

It doesn't help that the original *Hush* was so influential on the last two decades of Batman comics that this follow-up is struggling to stand out from the crowd of other attention-grabbing Dark Knight sagas, especially considering that *Hush 2*'s central narrative hook of "What if a game-playing villain wanted revenge on Batman?" isn't exactly fresh. Even Lee's art doesn't quite hit the opulent heights of his previous work.

While *Hush 2* has plenty of eye-catching moments, it's going to have to deliver some proper surprises in its remaining issues if it wants to match its predecessor.

Saxon Bullock

IT'S A SHAME YOU CAN'T BE IN TWO PLACES AT ONCE.
YOU HAVE OTHER KNIGHTS IN JEOPARDY.
ANY WAY YOU PLAY THIS, BRUCE --
-- THREE ROBINS DIE TONIGHT!

Hush: silent but deadly.

i Loeb got his big break in 1985 by co-writing werewolf comedy *Teen Wolf* and action classic *Commando*.

VATICAN CITY

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **Dark Horse Comics**

Writer **Mark Millar**

Artist **Per Berg**

ISSUES 1-3 **Like *Sinners* meets** *The Da Vinci Code*, this fast-paced three-parter, set in the Holy See, couldn't be timelier, what with its release coinciding with the recent election of a new pontiff.

Essentially a siege thriller with added bloodsuckers, Mark Millar's pared-back narrative emphasises action over character nuance. Rather than a larger-than-life protagonist like Huck or Nemesis, the story centres on a band of everyday survivors, who are hiding out in the Vatican after a vampire apocalypse. A practising Catholic, Millar adeptly blends vampiric traditions with religious lore. As the undead hordes attempt to rescue their queen, long-buried in the papal vaults, he also can't resist throwing in some trademark esoteric history.

With his fluid, cartoony figurework, Per Berg proves to be an odd but inspired artistic choice as he combines kinetic layouts with some exhilarating action scenes. Aided by his vibrantly bloody colour palette, he brings an expressive quality to the gorier moments rather than explicit detail.

As usual with Millar, it's hard to tell how much he has his tongue in his cheek: the power of prayer actually plays a part in the almost biblical conclusion, which has a touch of *Good Omens* about it. Undercutting this with some typical death and destruction, he also leaves room for a second coming.

Stephen Jewell

HUXLEY

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Read Only Memory**
Writer/artist **Ben Mauro**

GRAPHIC NOVEL **Comic art and** movie concept art have always been closely related, with many comic artists having significant success in helping to design or storyboard blockbuster films. *Huxley* is an example of the reverse happening, with writer/artist Ben Mauro starting off working on movies like *Elysium* and Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy, before trying to craft his own massive sci-fi universe.

An independently funded graphic novel that's designed to kick off a whole saga, this is a space opera set in a grim and gritty future, in which two scavengers discover and reactivate a mysterious wrecked robot. Named Huxley, the robot sets off on a quest to uncover its previous identity, and the story is soon exploring lots of traditional pulp SF concepts while also showcasing vivid visuals.

Unfortunately, while this story is obviously a passion project for Mauro, it's also a clear example of how concept art and comic-book storytelling are *very* different disciplines. Despite a couple of effective action sequences, there are too many pages here that feel inert and awkwardly executed, while the clunky, tin-eared dialogue is hampered even further by some spectacularly awful lettering (by Mauro).

The ambition in *Huxley* is easy to applaud, but the project stumbles at the first hurdle and ends up trapped firmly in the shadow of other, more inventive sci-fi sagas.

Saxon Bullock

ABSOLUTE MARTIAN MANHUNTER

Keeping up with the J'onzzes

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Deniz Camp**
Artists **Javier Rodríguez**

ISSUES 1-3 **The Absolute Universe** line has afforded DC the chance to take a few big risks with its core characters, usually altering their personal circumstances while keeping the core of the character intact. The Absolute Batman, for example, is no longer a wealthy playboy, but grew up in poverty. Wonder Woman is from Hell rather than Paradise Island, but still stands for all that is good.

Absolute Martian Manhunter goes a step further by reimagining the entire concept from the ground up. Deniz Camp and Javier Rodríguez's comic is more a weird psychological thriller/buddy cop story than it is an alien superhero story. Its central character is no longer an alien posing as a human, but a traumatised FBI agent (John Jones, in a nod to the character's original name, J'onn J'onzz) who, following an injury, melds with a disembodied extraterrestrial intelligence he quickly dubs "the Martian Mindfucker".

Mindfuck is right! There's a playful, psychedelic quality to the storytelling here that recalls Grant Morrison's Vertigo comics. But it's Rodríguez's pop expressionist art which most clearly conveys this unsettling concept. As John's life is gradually taken over by the alien, he starts to experience emotions and ideas as colours and shapes. This culminates in an unsettling sequence where the creature tries to explain something, but all John can see is a synaesthetic riot of jagged lines and primary colours.

Bold, a touch baffling, but undeniably brilliant, this might just be the best Absolute comic yet. **Will Salmon**

i Camp's primary influence was Thomas Pynchon's "psychedelic noir" novels *Inherent Vice* and *The Crying Of Lot 49*.

THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writer **Joe Kelly**
Artist **Pepe Larraz**

ISSUES 1-4 **It's relaunch time** for Spidey, as Marvel once again hits the "new first issue" button and Peter Parker finds himself in another heap of superhero-related trouble.

In these opening four issues, Peter is down on his luck and unemployable, but finally gets a science job thanks to an old friend – just as a fight with the Rhino ends up with him ingesting a whole bunch of mystery hallucinogens.

Peter has to find out who's manufacturing these drugs, but the attack leaves him suffering from regular hallucinations, making it harder than ever to keep his everyday life on track.

All of this is told with style by writer Joe Kelly, who carefully balances the well-crafted action with comedy and effective emotional storytelling. He also makes this a lot more new-reader-friendly than most recent superhero relaunches, even with some of the odder twists (like Spidey now being best friends with a newly reformed Norman Osborn).

What pushes this from enjoyable into outstanding is the spectacular art from Pepe Larraz, who once again proves himself one of the best superhero artists at work today. While upcoming issues will see Larraz alternating story arcs with longtime Spidey artist John Romita Jr, this new phase of Spider-Man's adventures is already heading in promising directions. **Saxon Bullock**

BLADES OF FIRE

Worth a stab

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PS5**
- Also on **Xbox Series S|X, PC**
- Publisher **505 Games**

VIDEOGAME **With a name so** generic that you've probably already forgotten it (*Knives Of Flames*?), hopes weren't high for this one. What a pleasant surprise, then, that it's not just the millionth game to rip-off *Dark Souls*, but a great third-person adventure with ideas all of its own.

You're Aran De Lima, a blacksmith who can forge all sorts of deadly weapons, on a noble quest to – oh dear – kill the queen. He's assisted by Adso, a scribe who takes extensive notes of the soldiers and monsters you're fighting, often proudly showing off about this while you're still busy trying to fight those monsters.

Irritating? Potentially, but good writing and voice performances actually make them a terrific double-act, giving a welcome humorous tone to a game that could have easily been far too dark. There's still blood spraying everywhere, with multiple throat-slitting scenes for the gorehounds, and several castles that even Dracula might find a little OTT. But too many of *Dark Souls*' countless imitators overdo the first word of that game's title. *Blades Of Fire*'s lighter Indiana-Jones-aping touch is incredibly refreshing.

None of that would matter if the combat was lacklustre. Luckily, it's a terrific battle system, with almost every weapon you can forge feeling great. Landing a heavy blow with a polearm is a screen-shaking heavy-impact treat. Weapons we've dismissed in other games, like a lowly pair of axes, are too fast and fun to use to be ignored here.

The game's most controversial idea is that every weapon you forge will eventually break beyond repair. While this is occasionally frustrating, it's more than worth it for how effectively it gets you to try a wide variety of tools instead of just clinging to the same sword for 60 hours.

Exploring is fun too, thanks to clever level design that's packed with shortcuts and secrets. The game is from the same studio that made the superb *Metroid Dread*, and it shows. If you love Soulslikes and want to break out of your combat comfort zone, you should absolutely try... er... *Swords Of Pyromania*, was it?

Abbie Stone

ℹ Art director Arturo Serrano wanted to hark back to the style of '80s fantasy movies like *Willow* and *Conan The Barbarian*.

"Adso, mate, fancy giving us a hand? No? FINE."

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: TACTICAL TAKEDOWN

★★★½☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PC**
- Publisher **Strange Scaffold**

VIDEOGAME ***TMNT* but** turn-based? How well can that fit these dynamic, pizza-loving protectors of New York City? Very. For all the plastic tat the Turtles have generated over the years, the scrappy indie-energy core from Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird's original comics continues to enable radical departures.

Separated after the death of their mortal enemy Shredder and their mentor/father Splinter, the brothers must come together when the Foot Clan threaten the city once again. Rather than playing all four heroes at once, each mission is laser-focused on a bite-size arcade-like challenge that makes use of each turtle's unique skills. Tech-whizz Donatello throws down traps to keep enemy ninja at bay, for example, while Michelangelo breezily kickflips over enemies in the street.

The round-based nature offers precise action, and turns can whizz by in seconds once it clicks. Screen-clearing combos are a thrill, though getting swamped by constantly incoming enemies can be punishing – encouraging an over-reliance on simpler tactics. Likewise, a lack of mission variety really doesn't allow time for *Tactical Takedown* to come out of its shell, though it's fun while it lasts. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

SPACE SECURITY SERVICE: THE VOORD IN LONDON

Kingdom come

FULL CAST AUDIO DRAMA STARRING JANE SLAVIN AND JOE SIMS
FROM THE WORLDS OF
BBC DOCTOR WHO
THE VOORD IN LONDON
SPACE SECURITY SERVICE

★★★½☆

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
- Running time **252 minutes**
- Format **Download**
- Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **Just like his** deathless creations the Daleks, Terry Nation dreamt of universal conquest. Inspired by the spy craze of the '60s, he not only featured the resourceful agents of the Space Security Service in two of his *Doctor Who* scripts, but also charted their exploits in tie-in books. Ambitious plans for an American network series crashed and burned.

Big Finish has recently taken up the baton. This *The Worlds Of Doctor Who* box set foregrounds SSS agent Anya Kingdom (daughter of Sara from 1965's "The Daleks' Master Plan") and her android colleague Mark Seven, previously introduced in the *Dalek Universe* releases.

Opening instalment "The Voord In London" finds Anya undercover as a copper in '80s Britain. It's the breeziest of these three stories, clearly indebted to the lairy, nicotine-stained satire of *Life On Mars*, though the inclusion of the alien Voord, another Nation creation, feels more like a wink to hardcore *Who* fans than a crucial part of the plot. The shamelessly titled "The Thal From GRACE" heads back to the 41st century, piling on the intrigue in the pursuit of an experimental weapon. "Allegiance" is also heavy on the interplanetary politics, an earnestly played tale with something to say about the ethics of augmentation.

> **"Jane Slavin keeps Anya an engaging hero"**

Paired with Joe Sims's amusingly aloof Seven, Jane Slavin keeps Anya an engaging hero, bringing cheek and warmth to the cool, knotty realm of cosmic espionage. And while the Daleks don't take centre stage, rest assured that the sacred words "Aim for the eye-piece!" are present and correct.

Nick Setchfield

ℹ The SSS first appeared in "Mission To The Unknown", the only *Doctor Who* story not to feature any of the regular cast.

DOOM: THE DARK AGES

Hell awaits, again

Doom Guy has been replaced by the Slayer. Shocking.

★★★★☆

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PS5**
- Also on **Xbox Series X|S, PC**
- Publisher **Xbox Game Studios**

VIDEOGAME **Whereas *Doom* (2016)** sought to remould a classic first-person shooter formula for a new generation of players, and its successor, *Doom Eternal*, supercharged that action, *Doom: The Dark Ages* opts to dial everything back.

The result is a medieval-infused prequel that's slower and more methodical than its direct predecessors. The relentless aggression of the 2016 reboot has been replaced with a more acute focus on precise movement and precision parrying. The breakneck speed and verticality of *Eternal* is rendered obsolete by a wider push towards open-area combat arenas so densely packed with projectiles that you'll feel as if you're shooting through mazes with razor wire.

Beneath these divisive changes, developer id Software has once again proven itself to be a master of its craft. *The Dark Ages* is an exceptionally well-crafted FPS. The Super Shotgun remains one of the most enjoyable weapons to wield in the genre, while the new Shield Saw allows for ripping and tearing like never before – its capacity to act as both an offensive ranged projectile and a defensive projectile parrying tool is exceptionally smart.

> **"A prequel that's slower and more methodical"**

Less successful are the introduction of pilotable dragons and mechs. In a realm where on-the-ground gunplay and movement is so damned satisfying, these enforced diversions feel like tired distractions, dissipating momentum otherwise built across a largely satisfying, lengthy single-player campaign.

The Dark Ages doesn't feel as revolutionary as *Doom* and *Eternal*, but it's still a lot of fun. Rip, shred, tear – these fundamentals remain, and feel as good as they ever did. **Josh West**

ℹ Look for riffs on paintings like Friedrich's "Wanderer Above The Sea Of Fog" and Goya's "Saturn Devouring His Son".

JULY 1987

SFX's time machine hurls us back to a random month once again

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

FLASHBACK

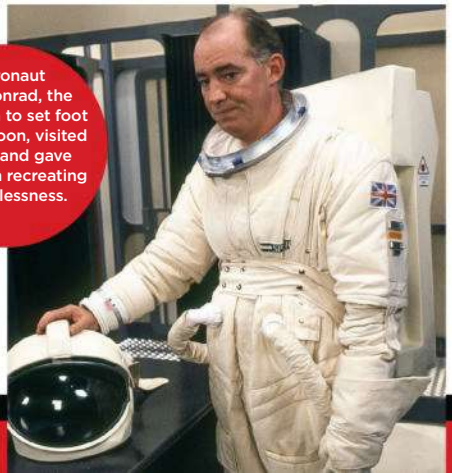
"Anyone who makes a *Pigs In Space* joke gets arrested."

CSI: Moon

6 JULY 1987 "It was a road to Hell paved with good intentions," *Star Cops* star David Calder told *SFX* in 2018, reflecting on one of sci-fi TV's greatest missed opportunities. "I was actually very disappointed by the way it was handled by the BBC." Perhaps all involved should have heeded the lyrics to the show's theme song, a weedy weepie by Justin Hayward that warned, "It Won't Be Easy".

Set in 2027, the nine-episode series gave a near-future twist to the standard police procedural. Calder played Detective Chief Inspector Nathan Spring, a "good copper" newly promoted to Commander of the International Space Police Force. Stationed on the Moon, Spring and his multinational team are tasked with enforcing law and order as humanity edges into the Solar System. It's only one small step for criminal kind, after all...

Originally pitched as a radio serial in 1981, *Star Cops* was devised by Chris Boucher. A former *Blake's 7* script editor, he had form when it came to both crime drama and science fiction, having earned writing credits on *Doctor Who* and *Bergerac*. But Boucher immediately clashed with the show's assigned producer, Evgeny Gridneff. Theirs was, he memorably claimed, a relationship that "started at the bottom and worked its way down".



Astronaut Pete Conrad, the third man to set foot on the moon, visited the set and gave advice on recreating weightlessness.

Another battle between competing creative visions is all too apparent. Initial director Christopher Baker favoured a clean, overlit look, closer to Stanley Kubrick than George Lucas. Graeme Harper, given the second block of episodes, hit the dimmer switch. When Baker returned, up went the lights again.

Despite the prestige of a *Radio Times* cover, the Beeb appeared to have little faith in the series. It was broadcast on BBC Two, scheduled against such sitcom warhorses as *Sorry!* and *Terry And June*. "It was absurd, really," Calder told *SFX*. "They put it out at the height of summer, in the middle of the Test Match... It was like they were trying to hammer a hole in the bottom of the ship to see it sink."

The season finale teased further adventures on Mars. But on the BBC sixth floor, this mission was quietly aborted.

Gene Hackman (Lex Luthor) also voiced Nuclear Man.

Nuclear Disaster

24 JULY 1987 Not so much a movie as a chunk of pure cinematic Kryptonite, *Superman IV: The Quest For Peace* proved an ignoble swansong for Christopher Reeve's Man of Steel. "[It] was a catastrophe from start to finish," the star lamented. "That failure was a huge blow to my career."

Quest saw the Cannon Group assume control of the dwindling franchise after original producers the Salkinds flogged the screen rights to the DC icon for a bargain $5 million. Cannon specialised in such gun-happy, low-rent schlock as the *Death Wish* sequels, but saw a new Superman movie as a way to announce themselves as major Hollywood players.

Persuaded to suit up once more, Reeve brought a social conscience to the project, insisting on a story that saw Superman attempt to defuse the nuclear arms race. "People will be more moved hearing this message in a movie than by listening to a politician say it," he told the press. Privately, however, Reeve was all too aware he was strapped to a likely bomb. "This movie is going to be terrible," he warned co-star Jon Cryer.

Staring down imminent bankruptcy, Cannon had slashed the budget. Blighted by cheapjack effects and the spectacle of Milton Keynes doubling for America, the film suffered a further body blow when a disastrous test screening led to 45 minutes of footage being hacked away. On release it proved a box office disappointment and a critical punching bag.

Cannon, it seemed, had built nothing less than a Fortress of Ineptitude.

A-ha pose with John Barry and Bond girls.

MIRRORPIX / CONTRIBUTOR/GETTY

Take Bond Me

11 JULY 1987 Timothy Dalton's debut as James Bond snatched the UK box office crown from *Police Academy 4: Citizens On Patrol* on 17 July, and held onto it in August.

Following Duran Duran's success with "A View To A Kill", the film's title song came courtesy of Norwegian pop gods A-ha, complete with synth stabs, sax honks and cryptic exhortations to "Save the darkness, let it never fade away".

In the recording studio the band clashed with co-writer and producer John Barry, the musical genius behind some of 007's most legendary scores. "None of us agreed with his worldview and the way he spoke about other human beings," singer/cheekbones Morten Harket told *NME* in 2022. "We couldn't speak a common language between each other."

Entering the UK chart in the week of 28 June-4 July, the single peaked at number five the following week. A-ha promptly recorded a Barry-free version for their next album, Stay On These Roads.

Pet Shop Boys: less cheesy than The Firm.

IN REAL LIFE

- **Prime Minister:** Margaret Thatcher
- **US President:** Ronald Reagan
- **In the charts:** Pet Shop Boys dancify Catholic guilt with their number one hit "It's A Sin", while The Firm's "Star Trekkin'" winds up Trekkies everywhere.
- **In the news:** £60,000,000 is stolen in the Knightsbridge Security Deposit robbery; the Channel Tunnel is given the go-ahead; the world's population reaches five billion; martial law ends in Taiwan after 38 years; salvage dives begin on the wreck of the Titanic.

ON THE SHELF

- Long-running American genre mag *Starlog* places Joe Dante's *Innerspace* on the cover. Other interviewees include Mel Brooks (on *Spaceballs*) and *RoboCop* star Peter Weller.

STAR COPS ® BBC. SUPERMAN IV ® CANNON/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK. IT'S A SIN ® THE PET SHOP BOYS/PARLOPHONE.

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

DAVID CRONENBERG

Some call him the King of Venereal Horror, some probably just call him Dave... how much do you know about his work?

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 1
Name David Cronenberg's debut feature film, released in 1969.

QUESTION 2
Which composer has collaborated with Cronenberg on all but one of the movies he's made since 1979?

QUESTION 3
In the infamous scene in *Scanners*, what device did the crew use to make a head explode?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Identify this Cronenberg movie from the poster detail.

QUESTION 5
Cronenberg spent about a year developing the film eventually made as *Total Recall*, before quitting the project. What's the title of Philip K Dick's original short story?

QUESTION 6
In *Videodrome*, what's the name of the Toronto TV station run by James Woods's character, Max Renn?

QUESTION 7
Which is the only one of Cronenberg's films to have been the subject of a big-screen remake?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Identify this film from David Cronenberg's acting role.

QUESTION 9
Which Cronenberg film had the poster tagline "Be afraid. Be very afraid."?

QUESTION 10
Cronenberg was once asked if he'd be interested in directing a Lucasfilm movie, but passed on the opportunity. Which one?

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11
Who played twin gynaecologists Beverly and Elliot Mantle in Cronenberg's 1988 film *Dead Ringers*?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Identify this film from David Cronenberg's acting role.

QUESTION 13
Cronenberg has made two unrelated films with the same title. What title?

QUESTION 14
What's the title of Cronenberg's first (and so far only) novel, published in 2014?

QUESTION 15
Which Cronenberg film centres on the Somafree Institute of Psychoplasmics?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Identify this Cronenberg movie from the poster detail.

QUESTION 17
Which author wrote the original book which *Naked Lunch* was based on?

QUESTION 18
Cronenberg's late sister worked as a costume designer across nine of his films. What was her first name?

QUESTION 19
Who played US Presidential candidate Greg Stillson in *The Dead Zone*?

QUESTION 20
Which Cronenberg film was later turned into an opera, first performed in 2008?

Answers
1 *Stereo* 2 Howard Shore 3 A shotgun 4 *Shivers* 5 "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale." 6 CIVIC-TV 7 *Rabid* 8 *Jason X* 9 *The Fly* 10 *Return Of The Jedi* 11 Jeremy Irons 12 *Last Night* 13 *Crimes Of The Future* (in 1970 and 2022) 14 *Consumed* 15 *The Brood* 16 *eXistenZ* 17 William Burroughs 18 Denise 19 Martin Sheen 20 *The Fly*

How did you do?

We couldn't think of a clever system...

0-5 Terrible
6-10 Poor
11-15 Average
16-19 Good
20 Brilliant

PICTURES© DAL PRODUCTIONS, CRYSTAL LAKE ENTERTAINMENT, ALLIANCE ATLANTIS/LIONS GATE, THE MOVIE NETWORK.

SFX

JULY 2025 | Issue 393

Future PLC, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Editor
Darren Scott
darren.scott@futurenet.com

Deputy Editor
Ian Berriman
ian.berriman@futurenet.com

Art Editor
Jonathan Coates
jonathan.coates@futurenet.com

Production Editor
Ed Ricketts
ed.ricketts@futurenet.com

Editor At Large
Nick Setchfield

US Editor
Tara Bennett

Contributors
Sam Ashurst, Calvin Baxter, Saxon Bullock, Nicola Clarke, Milford Coppock (design), Adam Davidson, Sarah Dobbs, Rhian Drinkwater, Richard Edwards, Ian Farrington, Dave Golder, Jamie Graham, Stephen Jewell, Sean Longmore, Una McCormack, Jayne Nelson, Ed Ricketts, Nikole Robinson, Will Salmon, Jack Shepherd, Neil Smith, Abbie Stone, Adam Tanswell, Oscar Taylor-Kent, Josh West, James White, Jonathan Wright, Steve Wright

Cover images
Star Trek: Strange New Worlds © Paramount/CBS.
The Sandman © Netflix/Warner Bros.

All copyrights and trademarks are recognised and respected

Printed in the UK by William Gibbons & Sons on behalf of Future.

Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU
marketforce.co.uk
For enquiries, please email: mfcommunications@futurenet.com

International Licensing/Syndication
SFX is available for licensing and syndication. To find out more contact us at licensing@futurenet.com or view our available content at futurecontenthub.com.

Advertising
Media packs available on request
Commercial Director Clare Dove
clare.dove@futurenet.com
Head of Commercial Jon Restall
jon.restall@futurenet.com
Account Manager Niamh Boorman
niamh.boorman@futurenet.com

Subscriptions
New subscribers
magazinesdirect.com
Email help@magazinesdirect.com
Renewal mymagazine.co.uk
Email help@mymagazine.co.uk
Manage your subscription online at www.magazine.co.uk
Consumer Revenues Director
Sharon Todd

Back Issues
Active subscribers have instant access to digital back issues through their iOS or Android device at no extra cost. For help, visit bit.ly/digiback. To purchase single print back issues, visit bit.ly/singleSFX.

Circulation
Newstrade Director Ben Oakden

Production
Head of Production Mark Constance
Production Project Manager
Clare Scott
Advertising Production Manager
Joanne Crosby
Digital Editions Controller
Jason Hudson
Senior Production Manager
Maaya Mistry

Management
SVP Consumer Kevin Addley
Managing Director, Games and Ents
Matthew Pierce
Design Director Simon Maynard
Head of Art & Design
Rodney Dive
Director of Group Finance
Oli Foster

SFX (ISSN 1358-5959) July 2025, issue 393, is published monthly with an extra issue in December by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK.
Full subscription prices: £71.50 for UK, £158 for Europe, $178 for US, £137 for Rest of World. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.
Application to Mail at Periodicals Postage Prices is Pending at Brooklyn NY 11256.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to SFX, World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.
Subscription records are maintained at Future Publishing, c/o Air Business Subscriptions, Rockwood House, Perrymount Road, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, RH16 3DH. UK

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards.

All contents © 2025 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions.

"Prince Adam for me"

ipso. Regulated

Widely Recycled

GPSR EU RP (for authorities only)
eucomply OÜ Pärnu mnt 139b-14 11317 Tallinn, Estonia
hello@eucompliancepartner.com
+3375690241

General Product Safety 2023/988: The use of our product under normal or reasonably foreseeable conditions of use, including the actual duration of use, does not present any risk or only the minimum risks compatible with the product's use, which are considered acceptable and consistent with a high level of protection of the health and safety of consumers.

SFX is a member of the IPSO (Independent Press Standards Organisation) which regulates the UK print and digital news industry.
We abide by the Editors' Code of Practice and are committed to upholding the highest standards of journalism. If you think that we have not met those standards and want to make a complaint, please contact legal@futurenet.com
If we are unable to resolve your complaint, or if you would like more information about IPSO or the Editors' Code, contact IPSO on 0300 123 2220 or visit www.ipso.co.uk

FUTURE
Connectors. Creators. Experience Makers.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange
(symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

Chief Executive Officer **Kevin Li Ying**
Non-Executive Chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief Financial Officer **Sharjeel Suleman**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

NEXT ISSUE

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

WE WERE SAFER IN SPACE

ALIEN: EARTH

A NEW XENOMORPH CHAPTER

PLUS!

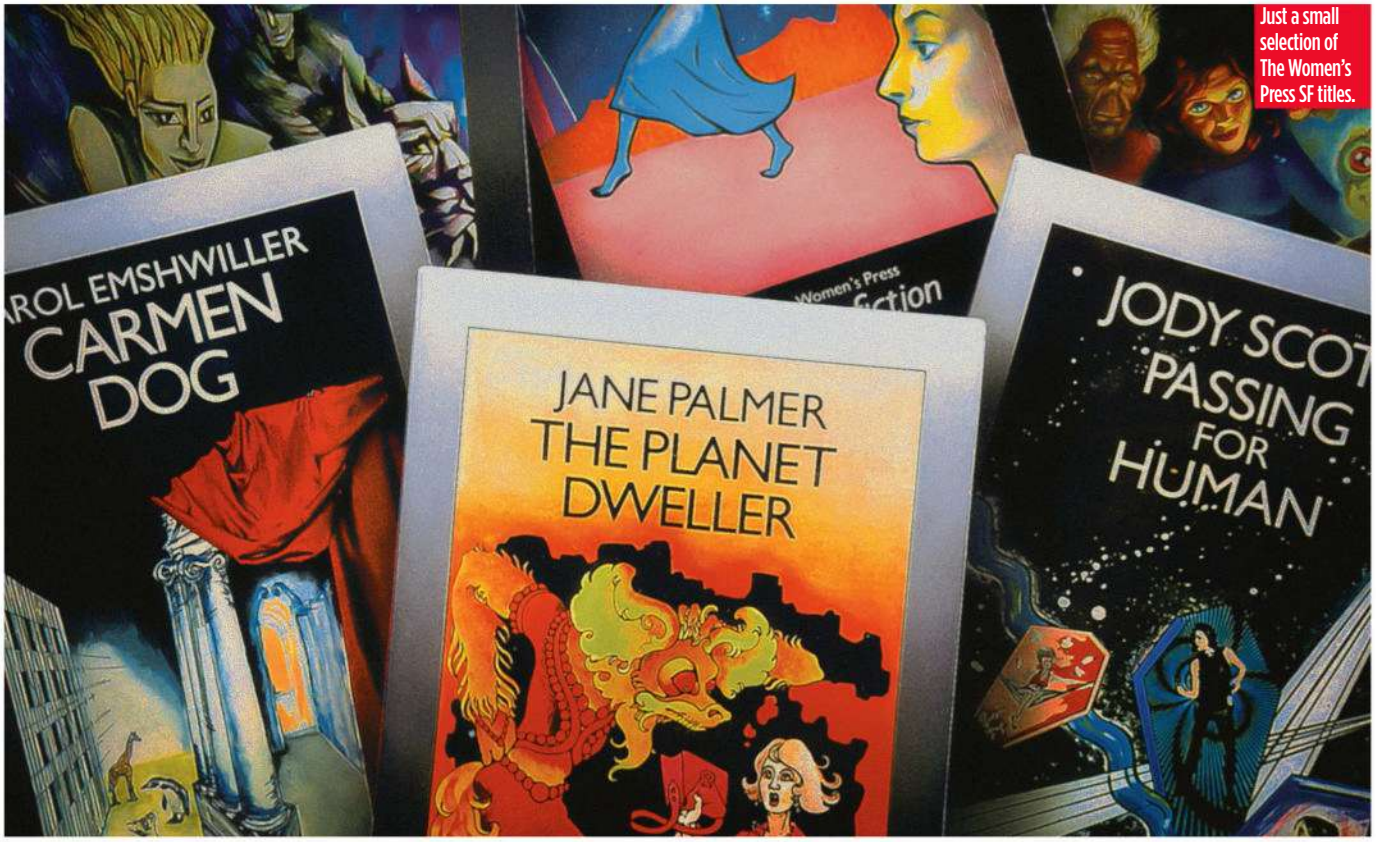
On-set exclusives!
Unseen archive material!
Superheroes galore!
Miserable teens!
A great big fishing hook!
And! Lizards! Vampires! Puppets!

SFX 394 ON SALE 16 JULY

Sign up to our monthly newsletter to receive a sneak preview! bit.ly/SFXnewsletter

All contents are subject to change, given whoever might be releasing a moving image online and calling it an "exclusive cover"

DISNEY/TCD/PROD.DB / ALAMY



Just a small selection of The Women's Press SF titles.

The Women's Press science fiction

Una McCormack, second-hand paperback aficionado

Those readers who, like me, have spent a fair chunk of their lives scouring second-hand and/or charity book shops will surely be familiar with the black-and-white "zig-zag" spines of The Women's Press. No? There's also a little steam iron icon to help identify them. Yes? You've got them now. Set up in 1977 by writer Stephanie Dowrick and entrepreneur Naim Attallah, The Women's Press was one of a number of independent feminist presses that emerged around this time (Virago – dark-green spines, bitten apple – is surely the best known) dedicated to publishing writing by women.

Both Virago and The Women's Press published a combination of contemporary women's fiction and reprints of lost classics. But The Women's Press was unique among these presses, as far as I'm aware, in publishing a substantial amount of science fiction. Grey-spined with bright artwork, the imprint had its own identity – though the steam iron icon remained mischievously in place.

Over the course of the imprint's run (from the mid '80s to the early '90s), around two dozen titles were published. A further dozen or so which can be classed as SF were published with the main imprint's "zig-zag" covers. As well as original SF by women and non-fiction essays examining the field, The Women's Press brought several key figures of American feminist SF into print in the UK for the first time, notably Joanna Russ and Octavia E Butler.

Our perceptions of what science fiction is and what it can be have altered substantially in the intervening decades, but in the early '80s this was a radical choice. There was an underlying suspicion towards the presence of women in the field and the use they made of the themes and apparatus of science fiction. The revelation that "James Tiptree Jr", that elusive writer of "ineluctably masculine" prose, was not the second coming of Hemingway but was, in fact, the pseudonym of a woman, Alice Sheldon, had put paid to some of this, but hostility certainly remained.

Such hostility has become overt in recent years as the backlash against diversity and inclusion has intensified and institutionalised. In this context, the core messages of feminist science fiction remain vital: we can surely do things differently. We can surely do better. The future, after all, is at stake.

Una is still scouring charity shops for a copy of Machine Sex And Other Stories.

Fact Attack!

- The range defined SF broadly, from time travel to dystopia. A horror anthology, *Skin Of The Soul*, edited by Lisa Tuttle, came out in 1990.
- "Forgotten" classics were part of the remit, like Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs Of A Spacewoman*, originally published in 1962.
- Non-fiction books included the first UK publication of a collection of essays by Ursula Le Guin, *The Language Of The Night*.
- The grey look inspired the cover design for Gold SF, an imprint of Goldsmiths Press that publishes intersectional feminist science fiction.
- The Women's Press publisher Stephanie Dowrick became a psychotherapist, writing bestsellers on topics like managing anxiety.

© THE WOMEN'S PRESS

AMIGUWHOMI

BBC DOCTOR WHO

PACKED WITH PATTERNS FOR ALL SKILL LEVELS!

BBC, DOCTOR WHO, DALEK and TARDIS (word marks and logos) are trademarks of the British Broadcasting Corporation and are used under licence. BBC logo © BBC 1996. Doctor Who logo © BBC 1973. Dalek Image © BBC/Terry Nation 1963 . Doctor images © BBC Studios 2023. Licensed by BBC Studios.

ORDER NOW

SHOWMASTERS PRESENTS

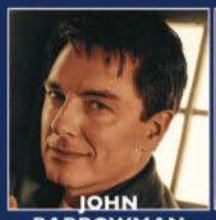
LONDON FILM & COMIC CON

5 - 6 JULY

LONDON OLYMPIA

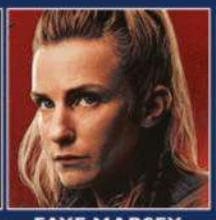
80+ GUESTS ALREADY ANNOUNCED!

MEET FILM & TV STARS, ARTISTS, AUTHORS & COSPLAY CREATIVES



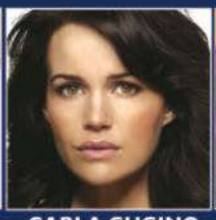
JOHN BARROWMAN
TORCHWOOD, ARROW

SEAN YOUNG
BLADE RUNNER, DUNE

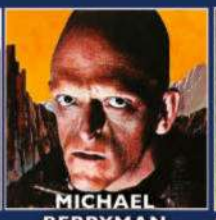


FAYE MARSEY
ANDOR, ADOLESCENCE

BRENDAN WAYNE
MANDALORIAN

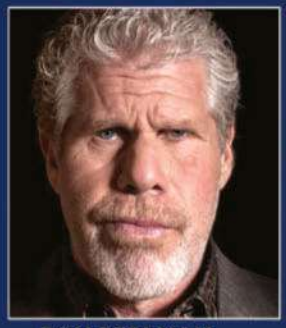


CARLA GUGINO
FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER



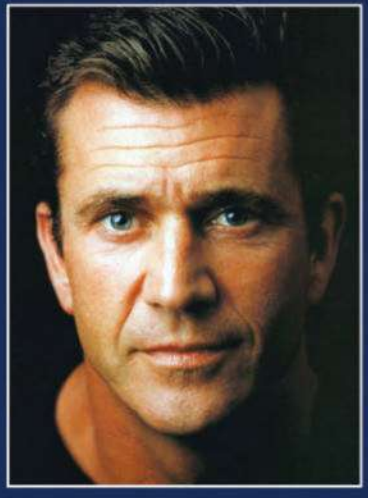
MICHAEL BERRYMAN
THE HILLS HAVE EYES

POM KLEMENTIEFF
GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY



RON PERLMAN
HELLBOY, ALIEN 4
SONS OF ANARCHY

RICHARD DREYFUSS
JAWS, CLOSE ENCCOUNTERS
AMERICAN GRAFFITI



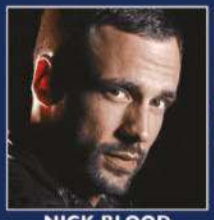
MEL GIBSON

DOMINIQUE MCELLIGOTT
THE BOYS, HOUSE OF CARDS
HELL ON WHEELS

VARADA SETHU
DOCTOR WHO, ANDOR
JURRASIC WORLD

NOW CONFIRMED!

TICKETS & DIAMOND PASSES ON SALE NOW



NICK BLOOD
AGENTS OF SHIELD

GATES McFADDEN
STAR TREK

RAGGA RAGNARS
VIKINGS, WHEEL OF TIME

CABOT-CONYERS
SKELETON CREW, ENCANTO

LADISLAV BERAN
HELLBOY, BLADE II

TANYA MOODIE
RINGS OF POWER, STAR WARS

DAN STARKEY
DOCTOR WHO

MANY MORE GUESTS ALREADY CONFIRMED!

PLUS LARGE DEALERS HALL, PHOTO SESSIONS, SIGNINGS, TALKS, COSPLAY, FAN ZONES & MORE!

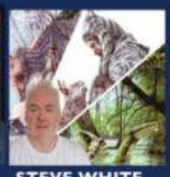
ESAD RIBIC

LAURA BRAGA

VALENTINA GRAZIUSO

RALPH HORSLEY

SAM HART



STEVE WHITE

ADI GRANOV

ANDREW THOMAS

RACHAEL SMITH

NOT JUST A GREAT WEEKEND... AN ESSENTIAL ONE!

TICKETS SELLING FAST! BOOK ONLINE NOW CHECK WEBSITE FOR MORE INFO AND THE LATEST UPDATES

www•LONDONFILMANDCOMICCON•com

Guests charge for autographs, subject to work commitments, not signing all days. Check site for terms/conditions

9001

9000